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RANCH ROMANCES

25c

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

SECOND APRIL NUMBER

FEATURING

WAGON TRAMP
by Frank C. Robertson

DAUGHTER OF THE DESERT
by Walker A. Tompkins

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30th Year
OF PUBLICATION

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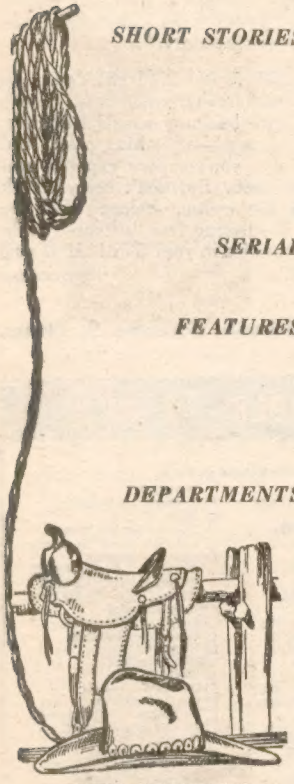

HELEN DAVIDGE
Editor

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Repeat Performance

Dear Editor:

How about coming in for a repeat performance? About 17 years ago I had a letter published in Our Air Mail, and made over 200 friends. But through the years I have lost track of all but one, and we still correspond. Then I was 21, 5'2" tall, and weighed 112. I collected cowboy songs. Now I'm 38, 5'2" and weigh 133 lbs. Like to collect needlework patterns, since I like to sew, knit and crochet. And I collect salt shakers. Have been married 15 years. My husband works long hours on a dairy farm and I have lots of time on my hands. I still like to write letters, so if any of my old friends are still reading RANCH ROMANCES like I am and sure hope they are, I'd like to hear from them, and also from some new ones.

ROSALIE A. STRAUSE

Box 139
Manteca, California

Keep Blues Away

Dear Editor:

Do you have an empty space in Our Air Mail for a 22-year-old with light brown hair and hazel eyes? I stand 5'5" tall and weigh 126 lbs. I get awfully lonesome. I like all outdoor sports, but rheumatic fever left me with a weak heart. So everyone, young or old, please write; help keep the blues away. Will exchange snapshots.

BILLIE SCHAEFER

1080 Robinson Street, Apt. 2
Oroville, California

Musical Sisters

Dear Editor:

Could a couple of teen-age Oregonians find a space in Our Air Mail? We are sisters. Grace is 5'3" tall and has dark brown hair and brown eyes. Kate is 4'11" tall and she is the oldest. She has blonde hair and gray eyes. We like the same things—basketball, swimming, etc. Grace plays the accordion and Kate plays the violin, piano, and organ. Come fill our mail box.

GRACE & KATE PATRICK

1720 Chestnut St.
Baker, Oregon

Wants Friends

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for a long time. I like the stamp of the early West very much and this book brings it out well. I would like to join in your pen pals section and get some friends of my own. I don't get very much mail from home. I am 5'6" tall and have brown hair and blue eyes. I weigh about 160 lbs. My nickname is SMILEY, so try to keep me that way.

PVT. RAYMOND JOHNSON

US55285378
H/S Co. 73rd ECB
SPO 909 %PM
San Francisco, Calif.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 29 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Real Lonesome

Dear Editor:

This is my first attempt to get into Our Air Mail and I am really hoping I make the next issue. I am high school girl of 16. I stand 5'3" tall and weigh 120 lbs. I have brown hair and green eyes. My hobbies are letter-writing and collecting photos. I am also a sports lover. I would like very much to hear from anyone who likes to receive letters. Please write; I am very lonely.

BARBARA MOORE

Box 135
Eastville, Virginia

Will Answer All

Dear Editor:

I am a serviceman in Korea. I read RANCH ROMANCES often, and enjoy it very much. I would like to receive letters from girls back in the States. I promise to answer every letter I receive. It is lonesome over here. I am 18, my height is 5'11", and I weigh 142 lbs. I come from the South.

PVT. JAMES T. STOREY

RA 24602098
Suc. Btry. 75th FA Bn
APO 264, Care PM
San Francisco, Calif.

Lonely Mom

Dear Editor:

I'm writing in hopes I may be fortunate in having a pen pal plea published. I'm 35 years old and the mother of four school-age children. With the kiddies away at school all day and hubby working long hours I do get real lonely here in the country. I haunt the mail box at mail time in hopes of getting even one letter. Formerly we lived in the city, but we've been here in the country since June. I'd prefer to hear from other mothers around my own age, if possible. I enjoy reading RANCH ROMANCES very much. I like to embroider and cook, and I'm learning to

sew by machine. Please, won't someone write to me?

MRS. C. E. BEAULIEU
RFD 2 Curran Road
Valley Falls, Rhode Island

Lonely Widow

Dear Editor:

I'm a widow of 54, and have been a reader of RANCH ROMANCES for many years and like it very much. I have three children, all married. I have a job too, but I get very lonely and would like to have some pen pals. I have traveled a lot and can write interesting letters.

MRS. JULIA WELLS
%Lee Ferree
Rutherfordton, N. C.

Got Around

Dear Editor:

I would like to receive letters from pen pals all over the world, especially in foreign countries. I wish they would write in their native language as I speak several European languages. I am a Yankee by birth, but have lived most of my life in Texarkana. The past five years I have traveled a lot. Been in 48 states, lived in Alaska eight months, also have been in all of Canada from Dowson City, Yukon to Halifax, N.S., including the Northwest Territories. I have traveled in Mexico, Panama, Colombia and have lived and worked in the jungles of Venezuela. Have visited British Guiana, Trinidad, Dutch West Indies, and Cuba. I am 21, 5'9" tall and weigh 165 lbs. I am of Norwegian-German descent. My hobbies are traveling, coin and stamp collecting, learning foreign languages and music. My civil occupation is surveying. I read RANCH ROMANCES every issue, and I have found a few pen pals through Our Air Mail. I'd like to hear from both boys and girls.

DONALD E. SIMONSEN
Route 7 Box 277
Texarkana, Arkansas-Texas

Eight Year Man

Dear Editor:

I'm a Navy hospital corpsman who would like to get some mail from girls near my own age. I'm 25 and 5'11" tall and have been in the Navy for 8 years. During that time I've been to China, Japan, Korea, Formosa and many other Pacific ports. I'm now attached to the Marine Corps, though, so I imagine I'll see plenty of new places the next couple years. I'd be happy to answer any letters I may get, since mail call is the bright spot in a pretty tiring day of training. So come on, girls, if you'd like to get letters from all over the world, I'll do my best to oblige.

RICHARD REEVE, HM USM
Field Med Trng Bn.
S A T R (Class 65A)
Camp Del Mar, Oceanside, Calif.

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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

IN HOUSTON, Tex., at day's end a judge complained of dry-cleaning methods because he'd been uncomfortable in his suit all day long. But at home he discovered that he'd donned his 15-year-old grandson's suit by mistake that morning.

FROM MODESTO, Calif., we learn that a broiler which 10 years ago took 12 weeks to produce now takes only 10 weeks. We wonder if we can eat them faster, too, and how the broilers feel about it.

OUT IN SOMONAUK, Ill., the 97-year-old railroad depot, which has been promised electric lights for the last 35 years, still uses flashlights after dark.

IN BERNALILLO, N. M., a tough teenager slashed the tires of an automobile with his razor-sharp homemade knife. He had 25 days in jail to ponder the fact that the car belonged to the chief of police.

A FICKLE paroled convict out in San Quentin, Calif., asked to be re-jailed to get away from his mother-in-law. But five days in prison made him decide freedom—even with a mother-in-law—was preferable, and they let him out once more.

A MYTON, Utah, driver hurtling along a too-familiar road, discovered too late that a bridge he was used to crossing had been removed a year before. "Always used to come this way," he explained to rescuers as they hauled him and his car from the river.

FROM WALLA WALLA comes the sad report of a man who rented a room, left his belongings, and then went downtown to dine. Afterwards he couldn't remember his address, and had to advertise his plight. Luckily his landlady saw the ad and came to the rescue.

FROM WASHINGTON comes the news that a new breed of chickens lay eggs that appear fresh even after two weeks at 100-degree temperature. Maybe they appear fresh, but we'll let someone else sample them, thanks.

IN SAN FRANCISCO the tax collector recently received an enigmatic note from a resident reading: "I am enclosing $5 for payment in full for 'One Night of Love.'" A few wary questions proved the money was for a library book the lady'd walked off with.

FROM SACRAMENTO comes word of a man who filched a pair of shoes from a department store, returned them to the store later because they pinched, and was himself pinched by the police for his misdeed.

RANCH

FLICKER TALK

by movie editor ROBERT CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

Taza, Son of Cochise

A slice of our early history, in 3-D and Technicolor, is Universal-International's latest, best Western

WHEN a big movie company hits a small town, what really happens? Do the people resent this upheaval in their lives, or do they welcome the actors and crew with open arms?

Well, to tell you the truth, they do a little of both. And Moab, Utah, (pop. 1274) is a case in point. Universal-International decided to film *Taza, Son of Cochise* there, and brought a crew (pop. 124) from Hollywood plus a tribe of Navajos (pop. 200) from Arizona. Naturally, Moab at first was in an uproar. All its facilities were taxed.

There was nothing like enough rooms for the company to sleep in, so Mayor George Burck appealed to the folks to open their houses—which they did, some willingly, some reluctantly. The Indians pitched camp on the fairgrounds, so they didn't require beds, but they did have to eat. Even though they brought some of their own food, the local grocers could hardly keep their shelves stocked, with the extra supplies the Indians wanted.

Then there was a crisis over laundry. Moab has no commercial laundry, and again it took an appeal from the Mayor to get the local ladies to do the job. But that didn't settle the problem because the ladies were fussy about *whose* laundry they did. Naturally, everyone wanted to do Rock Hudson's or Barbara Rush's. The tactful mayor settled that hassle by having the volunteer laundresses draw lots.

Luckily there were enough movie jobs for everyone who wanted them. Over 100 ranchers and cowboys were signed up to play cavalrymen. Even the talented horses, sheep and goats of Moab got their turn in front of the camera.

U-I had one special plum to offer—a speaking part for a girl. Director Douglas Sirk had some doubts about casting this part locally—but that was before he saw the mayor's daughter, 18-year-old Barbara Burck. Most Hollywood starlets would envy Barbara her debut, which included a dramatic death scene. She got a hand from the crew after she'd played it.

But her success didn't go to her head. The day after her triumph, she volunteered for the tiring and unglamorous job of stand-in for Barbara Rush.

Once the townspeople had gotten used to the excitement, they seemed to settle back and enjoy it. Moab for a while had a split personality. Every morning it looked like a frontier town of the 1870's, as blue-uniformed calvalrymen, Indians and bearded ranchers hurried to work. But at night Main Street looked more like Hollywood and Vine, as the actors, dressed as themselves again, strolled up and down, beseiged by teenagers demanding autographs.

And of course the local citizens could hardly object to the way money was pouring into the town—at the rate of $4,000 a day. But aside from the immediate benefits, Mayor Burck believes that the movie will bring a long-range prosperity to the town. "Just wait," he said, "until the public sees our scenery in 3-D and Technicolor. It will create a stampede to see it in the flesh."

And when the company finally left, people were sorry to see them go. The mayor put it this way: "We'll miss the glamor, the excitement and the fun. But above all, we'll miss the members of the company. We got a wonderful viewpoint of Hollywood from them."

The movie itself, *Taza, Son of Cochise,* is a story of love, hate and violence on the Arizona frontier, when the fierce Apache were burning, killing and pillaging, and making the Southwest unsafe for settlers. And it's the story of one noble Apache, Taza, son of the famous Chief Cochise, who tried for years to bring peace between his people and the white men.

Rock Hudson plays Taza, and Bart Roberts is his evil brother Naiche. The two fight over the leadership of the tribe, over peace or war with the settlers and over the love of beautiful Barbara Rush.

As for Cochise himself—I'll give any Western fan just one guess as to who plays him. Even though the part is only a bit at the beginning, it had to be Jeff Chandler. By our count this is his fourth portrayal of the great Indian Chief. If this sort of thing keeps up, Jeff will soon be known as Cochise, the way Bill Boyd is known as Hopalong.

Barbara Rush is courted by both Rock Hudson and Bart Roberts

(Columbia)

Phil's not a born Westerner—he just looks that good

PHIL CAREY
Star Material

PHIL CAREY is nicely established as an up-and-coming young movie star, but his success is *not* the fulfillment of a lifelong ambition.

"What I always wanted to be when I grew up," Phil admitted, "was a radio announcer. Or maybe even a radio actor. It just never crossed my mind that I could be in the movies."

It crossed lots of other people's minds, though. First there was the professor of dramatics at the University of Miami, who persuaded Phil to try out for a college play. Later plenty of other people said, "You ought to be in the movies," including one theater owner who arranged for Phil to have a screen test in New York.

Actually, it would cross anybody's mind who took a look at Phil that he ought to be in pictures. There's a lot of him—6 feet, 3½ inches—and all of it is handsome. In photographs he looks dark-haired, but his hair is actually light brown and his eyes are blue. He has a warm grin, and a slow way of moving and talking which makes him a natural for Westerns.

He's not Western, at all, however. He was born 28 years ago in Hackensack, N. J., and spent all of his life in the East, except for a period with the U. S. Marines during the war. It was after his service that he started toward a career in the movies.

From the day he took that screen test life has been a whirl for Phil. He was sent immediately to Hollywood, and three days after he got here he found himself on the deck of a submarine, playing a second lead to John Wayne in *Operation Pacific*. In the three years since he has made 11 movies, the last six of which have been Westerns. Recently he signed a contract with Columbia, and he's currently in *The Nebraskan* and *Massacre Canyon*.

Except for the fact that he's a movie star, he thinks he's a pretty typical American. "I'm a happy husband and a proud father," he said, "just like any guy."

He married his college sweetheart, and now has two children—a little girl, Linda, now 3½, and a boy, Jeffrey, who is 2.

And just like almost any guy, Phil's favorite food is steak, and his favorite recreation is sports. He's mostly a spectator, though, a football, baseball and hockey rooter. When he goes in for any exercise he chooses golf.

One thing unusual about Phil is that he's very fond of good clothes—or perhaps the unusual thing is that he admits it.

"I'm much more extravagant about my wardrobe that my wife is," Phil confessed. "In our house it's never Maureen who says, 'I haven't a *thing* to wear,' while staring at a closetful of clothes. It's me. In fact. I'm always urging her to go buy a new dress. Of course, I always excuse my extravagance on the basis that an actor needs a large wardrobe; but now that I'm playing in Westerns, that argument doesn't hold."

Phil's favorite indoor recreation is talk. He loves long discussions about books and music. He's a serious guy, really. He is constantly trying to improve his acting by studying other people's performances.

He certainly puts a lot of effort into his ambition to be competent. Whenever he's not actually in front of the cameras himself, he watches everything, particularly the work of the cameramen and the director.

He wants to play in all kinds of movies—except musicals. "It's not that I can't sing," said Phil with a grin. "I can warble like Caruso—but only in the bathtub."

STEVE FERNALL'S eyes widened with surprise as he rode around the barn and saw the dilapidated old covered wagon in the horse pasture. Grazing nearby was a pair of bony old nags with sore necks and shoulders from ill-fitting collars. *Wagon tramps,* he thought disgustedly.

Then his face brightened with interest as he saw a girl start to climb out over the double-trees, and he caught a glimpse of white flesh above the top of a black cotton stocking. It was a slender, well formed leg; well worth looking at. He rode through the gate.

The girl saw him, jerked her skirt down in a hurry and leaped to the ground. She had black, sparkling eyes and black hair that didn't look too well combed. In spite of a short, defiant nose she was rather pretty, and built like a dream. Her calico dress was faded and patched.

"Ain't you got nothing better to do than set there gawking at me?" she fired at Steve.

Steve grinned and rode nearer the wagon. "That's a right pretty leg you just had on display, miss," he said mischievously.

The girl grabbed up an ax and flourished it around her head. "You get out of here before I split your head open," she stormed.

"Well, now, let's reason a bit," Steve said good-naturedly. "I happen to live here."

"You one of them infernal Fernalls?" she demanded.

"The description is new, but I'm Steve Fernall. Anything wrong with that?"

Before she could answer, an old man's grizzled head was poked out of the rounded opening of the wagon cover. Little gray eyes squinted evilly over a tobacco-stained beard at Steve.

"Fernall, eh?" he growled. "He insulting you, Iny?"

"He was staring at me," she said.

IN A RANGE WAR, Steve learned, you have to fight fire with fire—and a spitfire with torrid kisses

"When you expose that much leg, miss, you can expect to be stared at," Steve retorted, beginning to lose his temper.

The next moment the girl let fly with the ax. Steve's horse leaped ahead and the ax passed behind him, but unpleasantly close. He had just roped a calf before coming around the big ranch barn, and had not yet coiled up his rope. Before the ax struck the ground twenty feet beyond him he dropped the noose over the girl's head, pinning her arms to her sides.

"I think it might cool you off a little to drag you through the creek a few times," he said angrily. "If you people want to camp on our property you'd better learn to be civil."

The old man bounced to the ground. He was tall and stooped, ragged and dirty. "*Your* property," he screeched. "This is my property, you thievin' skunk."

Steve was pretty busy, keeping his horse moving so that the girl couldn't get slack enough to free herself, and yet not wanting to hurt her. Their actions, and the old man's preposterous claim, made him wonder if they were both crazy. His bachelor uncle, Bill Fernall, had owned the Diamond F ranch for twenty-five years and there wasn't so much as a mortgage against it.

JUST THEN he saw a pair of feet dropping over the end-gate, and he glimpsed the barrel of a rifle. He slackened the rope, and the girl tried to fling the noose in his face as she released herself. The feet trotted around the far side of the wagon, and then a hairy young fellow of eighteen or nineteen, built exactly like the old man, stepped around the corner and started to swing the rifle toward Steve.

"Drop it!" Steve snapped, and the young fellow gave a violent start as he looked at the sixgun in Steve's hand. The fellow hesitated a moment, then let the butt of the rifle strike the ground. "All of you stand still," Steve shot out, at the end of his patience.

"Dad-burn," the old man said, but they remained motionless.

Steve said, "Ordinarily, we wouldn't mind people camping here, but we expect them to show a little manners, which is something you folks don't seem to have. Now hitch up those crow-baits and be on your way."

"Just what I mout have expected," the old man said bitterly. "They steal our land and then try to run us off with a gun."

They must, Steve thought, have gotten the Fernalls mixed up with someone else. "What the devil do you mean about somebody stealing your land?" he demanded.

"As if you didn't know!" the girl scoffed angrily.

Steve said disgustedly, "I think you're all crazy. I'll give you an hour to hitch up and be on your way." He rode back through the gate, looking back over his shoulder to make sure the youth didn't try to use the rifle.

Not bothering to put up his horse, he strode into the big Western-looking room in one corner of the ranch house which his uncle used as an office.

Bill Fernall, a tall, straight old man of sixty-five, had long since retired from active duty on the ranch; even most of the business had been taken over by Steve, his only heir. As Steve entered the room Bill looked up with a grin. "You've seen 'em too," he said.

"Who the hell are those people?" Steve burst out. "The girl threw an ax at me, the boy tried to pull a rifle on me, and the old man accused me of stealing a ranch from him."

"Sit down," Bill said. "It's quite a story. Their name is Buckle. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing."

"Well, you remember old Windy Jake. His name was Buckle, and it seems he was a brother to this old coot."

"Sure, I remember that old sot. Used to work here in haying for a good many years, as I remember. Died in a Juniper saloon last year, and you paid his funeral expenses, didn't you?"

"That's right."

"Well, he didn't have any claim on the Diamond F, did he?" Steve blurted out.

"Yes—and no. When Windy Jake

showed up here years ago, when you were just a little kid, he showed me what purported to be a deed from a Mexican named Manuel Acuna, claimed under some old Spanish land grant. He admitted later that he bought it for five dollars.

"I took him to a lawyer, who showed him that his deed was under a grant that never extended this far north. Jake Buckle admitted that it was no good, and was so friendly about it that I gave him a job, and had him on my hands after that until he died. He never mentioned the deed again, and I neglected to buy it from him. I could have had it for a drink of whisky."

"But the whole thing is silly," Steve protested. "That doesn't give these people any claim."

"Here's what I figure happened," Bill said. "Old Jake was a terrible blowhard and a liar. This brother was back in Missouri, and occasionally Jake would write to him. Wanting to seem a big shot, he dreamed up the idea that this was his ranch by rights, and he kept telling his brother what big things he was going to do for him as soon as he got his title quieted. This old geezer out here, Henry Buckle, swallowed it all. When Windy Jake died the coroner found that old deed among his effects and mailed it to Henry Buckle. Now Henry has come out here to claim his estate."

BILL LAUGHED, but after his recent experience Steve didn't see the humor in the situation. "How do we get rid of them?" he wanted to know. "I ordered 'em off the place, but if they think they own it they may not go."

"We're even up to now," Bill chuckled. "Old Buckle come in here and ordered me off. I was a little worried at first when he told me he had talked with Hy Cassidy and Tim Bell in town, and that they told him he had an iron-clad case and that they'd help him sue. But then he said everybody he had talked to in Juniper had told him they knew the Diamond F belonged to Windy Jake. Guess everybody thought it would be a good joke to send him out here."

Steve said slowly, "I don't know, Bill. With most of them it was only a joke, but anything Cassidy and Bell are mixed up in bothers me."

"Any trouble?" Bill asked quickly.

"Not yet. But Bell has brought twice as many cattle in here this spring than he has range for. One of his men told MacGlade they intended to crowd us out, and it looks like they'd have to if they stay. Bell and Cassidy are thick as thieves, and I'm suspicious of anything Hy Cassidy is mixed up in."

"Couldn't be because you're a little jealous of Hy, could it?" Bill asked slyly.

"Why should I be?" Steve asked coldly. "I know he's stuck on Roberta, but she happens to be engaged to me."

"Just kidding," Bill said. "You found out yet who owns the cattle Bell is running?"

"All I know is he calls it the Grouse Creek Cattle Company, and they call their brand the button-hook. I exepect to have trouble with 'em—plenty of it," Steve said. . . .

The Buckles obviously had no intention of leaving. They were still in the horse pasture next morning and the girl, Ina, was cooking breakfast when Steve and one of his punchers, a tough young redhead named Shorty Grant, rode up to see them. Henry Buckle squatted on his heels, watching the fire, but young Lem wasn't in evidence.

Ina straightened up and faced the intruders with clenched fists. Her hair was combed this morning, and hung down her back in two long braids. She looked clean, and Steve was forced to admit that she was even prettier than he had thought, in spite of her pugnacious little nose.

"Thought I told you people to leave," Steve said sternly.

"This land belongs to us. We're staying," Buckle stated stubbornly.

"Look. You people have been duped, first by that old windbag, Jake Buckle, and then by—"

"Hold on there, stranger. Don't you go slandering my dead brother," Buckle said, bristling like a long-necked fighting cock.

Steve said, "He couldn't be slandered.

He was never anything but a worthless old souse. If it hadn't been for my uncle he'd have starved. Bill Fernall even paid for his burial."

He realized instantly that he had made a mistake as Buckle pounced on his simple statement of fact. "If Jake was no good like you claim, howcome your uncle put up for him? Because he knew he was cheatin' Jake outa what was his."

"He felt sorry for him," Steve said. "And these people you talked with in town —they were ribbing you."

HENRY BUCKLE was fairly dancing in his excitement and anger. "You'll find out," he shouted. "Mr. Cassidy told me my claim was good, an' he said he'd put up the money to help me fight it, for half—"

"Pap," the girl interrupted, "you talk too much. Mr. Cassidy told you to keep that secret."

Buckle didn't look any more discomfitted than Steve felt. He was convinced now that this was more than a joke.

He said, "If you'll just let me tell you the straight of this thing—"

Lem, the girl's brother, had just climbed out of the wagon. He was bare-footed and in his undershirt, but this time he didn't have a gun. Now he interrupted Steve rudely. "You can't scare us with a lot of guff."

Steve's rope had proved useful the evening before, and he was dragging a small noose now. They had tried his temper enough, and he brought the rope's end down across the young fellow's back hard

enough to bring Lem to his knees with a bellow of pain. Buckle started for the wagon, but Shorty Grant said, "Hold it, pappy." Buckle stopped as he looked up at Shorty's gun. Lem scurried out of reach on all fours before he got to his feet.

"You cowardly bullies," Ina said, and then she proceeded to dress them down in language that a muleskinner would have envied.

Steve sat and listened. He could do nothing else, and he was a little ashamed of losing his temper. He had gone about it wrong.

He waited until the girl had to stop for breath, then said, "That was real persuasive, miss, but you'll still have to leave. I'm going to get the sheriff to move you, and if you talk to him like you have to me you'll likely wind up in our pretty jail."

He motioned to Shorty and they rode away, unable to tell whether he had made any impression or not. But there was no question in his mind that the Buckles believed they had a legal right to the Diamond F.

Having made his bluff, he had to go through with it. The nearer he got to town the angrier he became—not at the Buckle family, but with Hy Cassidy and Tim Bell.

When he entered the Oneida saloon his friends clustered around, wanting to know if he and his uncle had already been run off the ranch. They slapped their thighs with glee as they related how nearly everybody in town had gone along with the joke

and told Buckle his claim was indisputable. It had been a great joke.

Steve set up the drinks, but he didn't think it was funny. He was beginning to feel sorry for the Buckles, just as his uncle had felt sorry for Windy Jake. He felt worse when he learned that they had come all the way from the Ozarks in that old wagon on the strength of that worthless deed and Windy Jake's bragging.

Nevertheless, he hunted up Sheriff Tom Neeley and told his troubles.

"I heard about it," the sheriff said. "Of course if they're making themselves a nuisance I'll send Matt Radford out in the morning to move 'em off."

"I'll appreciate that," Steve said.

"Old Windy Jake must have pulled the long bow," the sheriff said. "I don't reckon he ever dreamed his folks would take him seriously."

STEVE walked over to the White Mercantile Company and through the store to a small glassed-off office in the back. A chunky young woman with big, baby-blue eyes and a mop of yellow hair jumped up from the desk and came to meet him.

"Steve, darling!" she exclaimed. She could put an adoring look into those big eyes of hers that made Steve feel big and protective and humble at the same time—even though he was well aware that where money was concerned Roberta White was a hard, calculating businesswoman.

"What a wonderful surprise," she said, as she stood on tiptoe to kiss him, his expensive diamond flashing on her finger. Her kiss was light as the peck of a hummingbird.

"You're looking great, Roberta," he said, and she did. She always wore expensive clothes and had excellent taste.

"Thank you," she said. "Come in and tell me what brings you to town."

Steve took a chair opposite her. Somehow, she always made him feel big and awkward. In spite of her weight, she had the knack of seeming to be petite.

He told her about the Buckle family, making it sound as funny as he could, but at his expense rather than the Buckles'.

Roberta smiled dutifully, but with no amusement in her eyes. Steve remembered regretfully that she had little sense of humor. She said, "I just can't stand such people. I hate them."

"I feel sorry for them," Steve said quickly. "The old man is shiftless and the boy a mean, quarrelsome lout, but the girl has got spirit and deserves a better break than she's getting."

Roberta gave him her baby stare which he knew could conceal some pretty deep thoughts. "Is she pretty?" she asked.

Steve wished he hadn't talked so much. He said carefully, "She might be if she had some decent clothes. If she comes in here you might be able to do something for her."

"We do that for any customer, Stevie, but for your sake I'll be extra nice if she happens to come in here. But I do hope she isn't too dirty."

Steve was feeling mildly dissatisfied with Roberta when he went out. He was going to see her again that evening and she would be softly feminine, but at such times he always had the feeling that she wasn't being her real self. The real Roberta came to the surface when they talked about the practical aspects of their marriage.

She had let him know in no uncertain terms that she wouldn't like living on a ranch. She had suggested many times that they could live in town and he could manage his business from an office. He couldn't quite see himself doing that, and had told her so. They had known each other many years before starting to keep company, and they talked business more than romance.

Steve thought it wasn't accident when he encountered Hy Cassidy and Tim Bell on the street. They were an oddly contrasting pair. Bell was tall and broad-shouldered, darkly handsome in his expensive range garb, and rarely smiled. He was quick-tempered, with a nasty tongue in his mouth.

Cassidy was the reverse in every way. He was roly-poly in build, talkative, and wore an eternal smile. He had a benign, cherubic expression which sometimes reminded Steve of Roberta's. Both men were

in their thirties. Cassidy had been around Juniper for several years and had proven himself a man of exceptional business ability. Beginning as a realtor, he now seemed to have a hand in many lines. Tim Bell was a comparative stranger, but he and Cassidy seemed closely connected.

BELL was first to speak. "Just the man I wanted to see, Fernall," he said. "Let's have a drink."

"Okay," Steve said, and they turned into the Oneida. He had an idea what was coming.

Cassidy made bright small talk until their drinks were served at a card table, well away from other customers. Steve didn't like either man, and he said curtly, "What's on your mind Bell?"

Bell replied off-handedly, "I'm moving a few thousand head of cattle into the Hoodlum Hills in a few days. I believe you run cattle there too."

"Only for about twenty-five years," Steve cut in.

Bell continued, "I don't like mixing my stuff with other people's, so I think we should agree on a line."

Steve studied the man while he weighed the answer he would make. It sounded like a colossal bluff, but if it was, Bell was being mighty cool about it.

The Hoodlum Hills were the very heart of the Diamond F range. They began as little more than scattered knolls at the edge of the plain, and became higher and rougher as they extended back to the Wah Wah National Forest, which was the Diamond F's summer graze. In the spring Steve turned his cattle into the Hoodlums, and by June they would be up against the forest boundary. When the fall rains came there was again good grass in the Hoodlum Hills—but never more than was needed by the Diamond F. In all the years Bill Fernall had run cattle, this was the first time anyone had ever questioned his exclusive right to do so.

Steve said finally, "The only line we'll agree to, Bell, is one between the Hoodlums and the flats."

"You own the Hoodlums?" Bell asked.

"We won't go into that. You know as well as I do it's our range by right of prior use."

Bell said, "I don't admit it. I've also made application with the forest service to have your allotment cut in half and given to us. When they do that you'll have to sell half your cattle, so you won't need more than half the range you've been using."

"You run a good bluff, Bell," Steve said, smiling.

It had to be a bluff. For years it had been Steve's and his uncle's pride that they had a perfectly balanced outfit. They had just enough spring and fall range in the Hoodlums, just enough summer graze on the forest, and raised just enough hay on the ranch to feed the cattle they owned. A cut one place would necessitate a cut elsewhere.

"You think so?" Bell said. "We've asked for a hearing on our application, and it's been granted. It'll be in Denver, or maybe even Washington. You'll probably get a notice."

"To get on the National Forest you have to have base property," Steve reminded. "You haven't got it."

Hy Cassidy spoke up then for the first time, still smiling and with a voice soft as butter. "What would you think if we told you we claim the same base property you do?"

"I'd say you were crazy," Steve shot back. "What're you driving at?"

Cassidy said, "I thought maybe you had heard that a man named Buckle claims to have a legal title to your uncle's ranch. Of course Buckle is a poor man and can't press his claim—unless he gets backing. I've agreed to finance his suit on a commission basis. If we win you'll have to take your cattle elsewhere, because I've agreed to lease everything to Mr. Bell."

STEVE was half choked with the anger he felt at what appeared to be a brazen attempt at blackmail. He got to his feet, his liquor still untasted. He said, "Spend all the money you want to backing that hillbilly's fake claim. You'll get no concessions from us."

He started to leave, but Cassidy called,

"One minute, Fernall. I have also bought other ranch property for the Grouse Creek Company, so Mr. Bell has enough base rights to justify applying for an allotment on the forest which will cut you down. You have no legal claim at all to the Hoodlums, so you had better compromise or we will, as the Bible says, smite you hip and thigh."

"Smite and be damned," Steve said grimly. "Your whole case rests on a worthless piece of paper, and there isn't a court in the country that would recognize it as legal."

"That remains to be seen," Cassidy said. "But it does have plenty of nuisance value, because it'll get us on the Wah Wah Forest."

They had all stood up, and now Bell said, "You better keep your cattle mighty close to your fences, Fernall, because I'm coming into the Hoodlums from the other way. If we have to shoot our way in we're ready to do it."

That was further than Steve had ever expected them to go, but Bell looked as if he meant it. They would not start a bloody range war on the strength of Henry Buckle's alleged claim, he was sure. Their real cards were in the hole.

"That's pretty big talk," Steve forced himself to say calmly. "But if you try it don't fool yourself for a minute that we won't shoot back."

He saw Tim Bell's hand moving toward the handle of his gun, and the man's eyes were bleak. He dropped hand to his own gun, ready to draw if Bell went through with it. For a moment they stood tense; narrowed eyes locked challengingly; then Cassidy stepped quickly between them.

"Let's have no trouble here," he urged. Then he added, "The thing for you to remember, Steve, is that if it comes to a range war we have nothing to lose, but you have everything."

That remark of Cassidy's was worth some thought, and it wasn't long before Steve figured out part of the meaning.

What Tim Bell and whoever employed him were really after was the right to run their cattle on the Wah Wah National Forest. The government would admit no more cattle, so the only way they could get what they wanted was to get somebody else's allotment cut down. That meant only the Diamond F.

They were attacking from two points. The claim against the ranch with the Buckle business was only a feint. The real punch would come when and if Bell moved cattle into the Hoodlums.

WHEN HE called on Roberta that evening, Steve was full of troubles and perplexities. He wasn't surprised that she grasped the essentials of the matter as quickly as he had done.

"They can make everything look bad for you, no matter what you do," she said. "After all, it does look as if you and Bill are taking a dog-in-the-manger attitude."

"And they're trying to steal something to which they have no right at all," Steve said. "We've never been hoggish, but if we give that outfit a foothold they'll crowd us completely out."

"I don't believe that," Roberta said. "I've talked with Hy, and he tells me all Bell wants is half your range, and he'll be able to pay you something for that. You really won't lose a thing."

Steve went suddenly cold. He had thought he was telling his fiancée something new, but she already knew all about it from talking with his enemy. And she was pleading that enemy's cause. And Hy Cassidy had been his rival before he and Roberta became engaged.

He said guardedly, "If we lose half our range, what becomes of our surplus cattle? I may be a little dumb, but I can't see how you can take five from ten and still have ten left."

Roberta snuggled up against him. "Now I think you're angry with me," she pouted. "You know I'm thinking only of what is best for us."

"You don't seriously think I should knuckle to Bell just because he threatens to shoot his way onto our range, do you? Why, it's nothing but blackmail."

"That's not a nice word," she objected. "You know that the main reason I think you should compromise with them is be-

cause I'm afraid you'll get hurt if they start a range war."

Apparently she thought he would be touched by her solicitude, but he wasn't. He knew her too well. She was angling for something. She wanted him to make a deal with Cassidy, and he wanted to know why. It occurred to him that she might be in love with Cassidy, and just playing along with him until she got what Cassidy wanted—but he was ashamed of the thought instantly. On the other hand, she liked money too well to see him give up so much if she really intended to marry him.

"Am I to understand," he asked evenly, "that you are suggesting that Bill and I just move over and let Cassidy and this man Bell take over half our range?"

"Yes," Roberta said, "I'm suggesting just that, and for your own good, and mine. You'll only be giving up something you never really owned because the range belongs to the government. In return Hy will see that that ridiculous claim brought by that hillbilly family will be dropped, even if you could beat that in time. But it will save you money."

"Roberta, just what are you trying to get at?" he demanded.

"Just this," she replied. "The way it is, all your interests are tied up in that ranch. I won't live out there. I'd die of loneliness. But if you would sell half your cattle and invest the proceeds in something here in Juniper, we could live here and you'd soon become a successful businessman."

It was out. She didn't want to marry a rancher. She wanted to make him over into something he didn't want to be.

He said, "There's one thing you overlooked. I actually don't own a dollar. And if you think Bill Fernall will lie down and be walked on you don't know the Fernalls."

"Nonsense," she scoffed. "You know you'll inherit everything Bill owns, and he'll back you up in anything you want to do."

Steve stood up, and said, "Well, Roberta, if Cassidy or Bell or anybody else gets the Diamond F range they've got to fight for it. I'd a damned sight rather see that tramp Buckle family get it all than for either of those two crooks to get any of it."

"Well!" Roberta said angrily, "you don't need to swear at me."

Steve left without even saying good night.

BY ACCIDENT, Steve met Marv Jensen, the local forest ranger, the next morning. Jensen confirmed that the Grouse Creek Company had asked that Fernall's allotment on the forest be cut down by fifty per cent, and assigned to it.

"You know how I feel," Jensen said. "You people have always been easy to deal with and you've never overgrazed. But some of the big-shots are prejudiced and will use any excuse to cut a big outfit down."

"But Bell's got more cattle than we have," Steve protested. "If he got all our range he'd still have to have more."

"I know. But somebody close to him has been using a lot of influence," Marv said. "I'll do what I can, but I've been told already that I'm giving you too much range."

Later, Steve had a talk with Judge Cornwall, who had been his uncle's legal advisor for years.

"There's no use to worry about Buckle's claim," the judge said. "It's simply no good. But it might have some effect on the forest officials, just as Cassidy said. They're trying to force you into committing some act of violence that will make it look as if you are holding government land by force."

"But don't we have any right to hold what we've always used?" Steve demanded. "Look how much Bill has done for this country. He's never refused to let any small rancher with a few cows share his range, but this outfit wants it all."

"No legal right," the judge said. "At that we would do better in a court of law than before someone the government will send out from Washington to conduct a hearing, with arbitrary power."

Steve started home without going back to see Roberta. On the way he met Deputy Matt Radford coming back from the ranch. The Buckle family, Matt assured him, had bowed to the law. They were on their way back to Juniper.

A few miles farther on he met them. Ina and her father were in the spring seat, the girl driving the poky team. Lem's big bare feet could be seen dangling over the side of the wagon-bed.

They stopped, and Steve politely lifted his hat to Ina. Buckle shook his fist at Steve and shouted, "You run us off this time, but we'll be back."

Steve rode on. There was no use to argue.

He had a talk with his uncle, and didn't try to play down the crisis they faced. "Well," Bill Fernall said, "It's up to you, Steve. I've retired—in everything except a paper title the outfit belongs to you."

"Hell of a help that is," Steve said.

"Just how can you keep Bell out of the Hoodlums?" Bill asked the question which Steve had been asking himself for hours.

"We'll shove everything over to the south end where he'll try to come in, and if we have to herd them like we would sheep we will," Steve answered.

"You talked to Roberta?"

"Yeah. She actually wants us to give in. Matter of fact she would like to have me give up the ranch altogether and go into business in town. That's not for me."

"Think it over," Bill said, surprisingly. "Roberta is a pretty strong-minded woman, but she'll make you a good wife. It might be better to sell out entirely. If you want to do that we'll put it up for sale with Hy Cassidy. All I want is enough to live on."

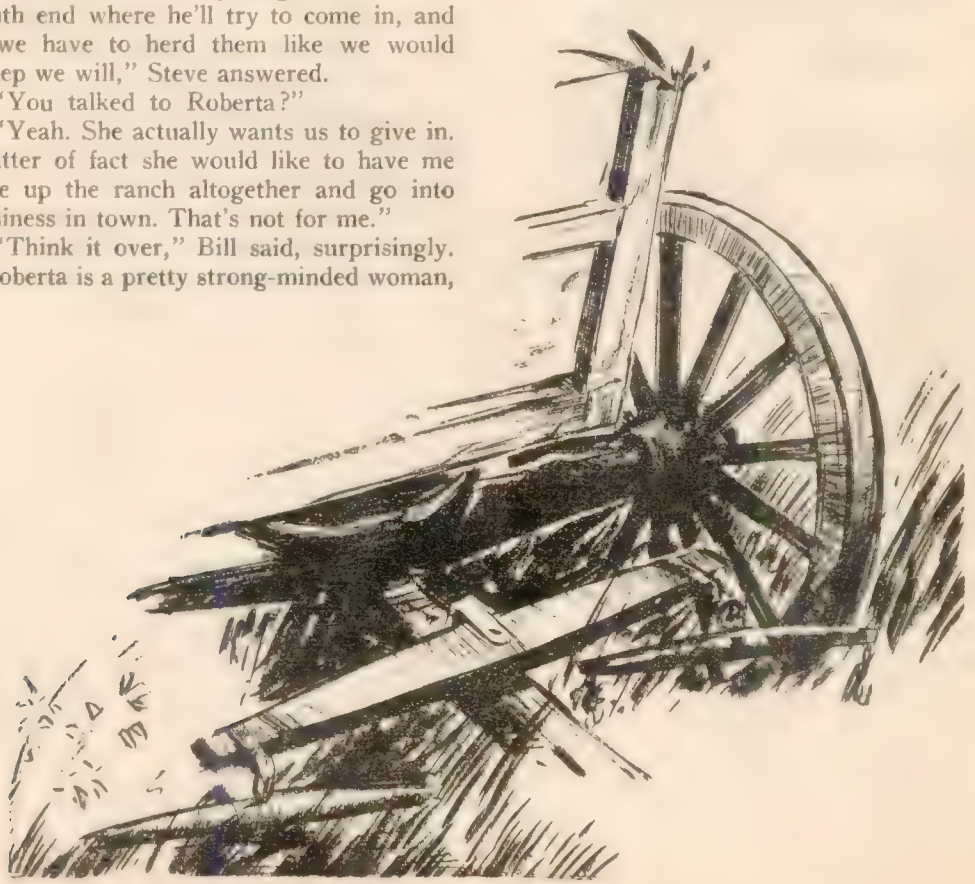
It was a generous offer. Steve knew that Bill would never be happy away from this ranch, but that he thought enough of Steve to make the sacrifice.

"Look," Steve said grimly, "nobody is going to make a house pet out of me."

THE BUCKLE FAMILY made camp on the banks of a creek near the edge of town. The site selected, Henry Buckle scrambled down and said. "You kids get things set up an' tend the team. I got business uptown."

"What business?" Ina demanded.

"This land business. Mr. Cassidy said come see him as soon as Fernall runs us off



Bell caught her wrist just in time to keep the knife from plunging into him

by law. Besides that, he promised me some money."

The girl said, "Well, I want some of it to buy groceries before you drink it all up." She sighed as she watched him go off, knowing that if he got any money he would head for the nearest saloon.

She had the team unhitched and unharnessed before Lem dragged himself out of the wagon. He was lazy and vicious, and there had always been a sort of armed neutrality between them.

She said, "Take Jim and Pete down the creek and find some grass for 'em; then come back and help me make camp."

Lem took the halter ropes reluctantly and led the horses around a bend. He didn't come back, and she hadn't really expected him. She was used to doing all the work. Sometimes she wondered how anyone could be as lazy as Lem or as shiftless as their father, but they had always been that way.

Ina couldn't remember her mother, who had died when she was three years old and Lem, five. There was a step-mother, too, who had died when Ina was twelve. She had

been a beaten-down woman, but kind, and she had taught Ina how to read and write. The girl had been fiercely eager to learn, and although she had had to be the woman of the house since her step-mother's death, she had managed to improve her schooling a little.

Since her childhood, she had devoured Jake Buckle's windy letters to her father, and she had believed his big promises that when he got the title to his vast properties cleared up he would do wonderful things for the family. It was about the only thing she had ever had to look forward to.

Still, she had been a little skeptical while they were making the long hard trip from Misswouri by wagon, until she had heard Hy Cassidy assure her father that Jake's claim had been good, but that it would take a lawsuit to secure his rights. So she had gone out to the Fernall ranch with hate in her heart against the people she believed were cheating the Buckles out of their rights. What had happened since hadn't softened her hatred at all.

Still, she had been thrilled in spite of herself when Steve Fernall had lifted his hat to her—the first time in her life any man had ever shown her that measure of respect.

Her father returned just before dark and handed her a ten-dollar bill. His breath smelled of whisky. "Buy some grub tomorrow," he said largely.

"How much did Mr. Cassidy give you?" she asked.

"About twenty-five dollars."

"How much did you give Lem?"

"Ten dollars—same as you. Can't be partial to my kids."

She said angrily, "Lem'll get drunk on what he has, but you expect me to buy grub for the family with mine. I got to have some decent clothes—and I know you got more than twenty-five dollars."

Reluctantly Buckle handed over another five, and she finally made him increase it to ten.

Lem staggered in for breakfast the next morning, his money gone. He drank some black coffee and fell asleep down by the creek.

AS SOON as her father had gone, Ina went up to the biggest store in Juniper, the White Mercantile Company. A plump, blonde young woman came to wait on her. Roberta didn't try to hide the amusement in her eyes as she looked at the girl in her scanty, ragged calico dress.

"Can I help you?" Roberta asked. She had brushed a male clerk aside.

"I want to buy a dress and some other stuff," Ina said.

"And how much would you want to pay?"

"Not a cent more than it's worth."

Roberta's smile became momentarily frozen. She said, "Why you must be one of the wagon—one of the people who claim the Fernall ranch."

"I am. The man who stole it from my uncle run us off, but we'll be going back."

"I have no doubt. Mr. Cassidy told me about you. Since you're going to be so rich, you'll no doubt want the very finest we have in the store," Roberta said, anticipating the girl's humiliation when she had to confess that all but the very cheapest material was beyond her purse. On sight they had taken a violent dislike to each other.

But Ina said, "I've got just ten dollars to spend for clothes. I want a dress, some shoes and stockings, and if there's anything left some underthings."

"I see. Well, ten dollars won't go very far, but there was a gentleman who asked me to do the very best I could for you, so you select the things you want, and I'll charge the remainder to him."

Ina didn't doubt that she was referring to Mr. Cassidy, and if he wanted to see that she got some of the money he was putting up it was all right with her. But she bought carefully and the things she selected were inexpensive. The bill, Roberta told her, came to a little more than sixteen dollars.

Ina handed over ten dollars. "You sure it'll be all right with Mr. Cassidy to charge the rest to him?" she asked.

"Mr. Cassidy? Oh, dear, I didn't mean Hy," Roberta laughed. "I was referring to Steve Fernall."

Steve hadn't agreed to pay any bills, but Roberta had meant to tell him she understood that was his intention. It would teach him not to feel sorry for girls like this one when he learned that she had charged things to his account.

Roberta was unprepared for the girl's violent reaction. "I'd go naked before I'd take any help from that black-hearted snake," Ina burst out. "If he thinks he can get around me by paying for my clothes he's got another think coming."

She brought out the other ten-dollar bill and tossed it on the counter. "That was to buy grub, but I'd go hungry before I'd take anything from him."

Roberta was smiling again as she gave the girl her change. "Steve really isn't so bad," she purred. "I am going to marry him."

"You can have him," Ina said vehemently.

She went back to camp, heated water, crawled under the wagon cover, gave herself a sponge bath and arrayed herself in her new clothes. She spent half an hour fixing her dark hair, and when she looked into an old cracked mirror she felt like a new person. She was better dressed than she had ever been in her life.

INA WAS so absorbed in this unusual glimpse of herself that she didn't notice the appearance of a man until he spoke from a rod away. "This the Buckle camp?" he asked.

Ina whirled around like a surprised animal. "What do you want?" she demanded suspiciously.

The man was tall, dark, and good-looking. His eyebrows lifted with surprise and he grinned. "Well, I did want to see your brother, but you've drove that clear out of my mind. I like looking at you."

Ina backed toward the front of the wagon. Inside, a butcher knife lay just within reach. She said, "Lem's up town, and you'd better leave here."

"Now wait a minute, sweetheart," the man said, coming closer. "Let me introduce myself. I'm Tim Bell. Me and Hy Cassidy are the men who've got this big deal on with your pappy."

Ina stopped. If this man was Mr. Cassidy's partner she couldn't afford to be rude to him. She already knew that Bell was foreman of the big cattle company that figured heavily in the deal. Bell held out his hand and she reluctantly accepted it.

Next moment she was jerked up against him and his hot lips were on hers. She struggled, but she couldn't break his hold or get her mouth away to scream. But she had gone through this sort of thing before and she wasn't giving in. She kicked and the toe of her shoe caught his shin. He loosened his hold, and her fingernails left several bloody furrows down his cheek.

"You little devil!" Bell breathed, and caught her to him more tightly than before. He rubbed blood off his cheek onto hers. "Go on and fight," he said softly. "I like it."

Ina allowed herself to go limp in his arms. He kissed her fiercely, then laughed. "If I'd known old Buckle had a pretty girl like you out here I'd have been around long before."

She suddenly twisted free, reached into the wagon for the butcher knife, and lunged at him. Bell caught her wrist just in time to keep the knife from entering his stomach. He was savagely angry now. She cried out with pain as he twisted her arm and the knife fell to the ground. In the struggle her new dress was ripped from collar to waist.

"You little nobody," Bell hissed in her ear, "if you think you can hold out against me—"

Then they heard Henry Buckle's voice, and Bell abruptly released his hold and his hand dropped to his gun. Ina fell to the ground.

"Mr. Bell! What in thunderation is going on here?" Buckle exclaimed.

"Nothing's wrong, Mr. Buckle," Bell said, forcing a grin. "Your daughter and I were just having a friendly little scuffle."

Ina leaped to her feet, her face still red with anger, and held the torn dress together. Buckle looked at her, and he saw the butcher knife on the ground, but he said apologetically, "That Iny has sure got herself a temper. You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, I did—or your son, rather," Bell

said smoothly. "You see, I'm short-handed. and it's to your interest and mine to break the stranglehold that Diamond F outfit has on the range. I thought maybe your boy could use a job."

"Well, Lem ain't much of a rider," Buckle said dubiously.

"There's other things to do beside ride."

"It's all right with me if you can get him to do it."

"If he's got as much spirit as his sister he'll do," Bell chuckled. He knew his man now. "Tell Lem to see me at the hotel in the morning."

When Bell had gone Buckle said severely, "Iny, what was you doing with that knife?"

"I was going to cut his guts out," she flashed back. "Look what he did to my dress."

"You can sew it up," her father said. "We gotta keep friendly with him and Mr. Cassidy."

Next morning, the dress repaired, Ina went up town and saw Lem riding out with Tim Bell. She had no idea that he would stay. The only thing Lem had ever done in his life was hunt, but he boasted of being a crack shot with a rifle.

She saw a little restaurant and went in, but she didn't sit down. An old Chinese with a parchment skin shuffled up. "You like to eat?" he asked.

"No, I want a job."

The Chinese looked her over, and said, "All light. You wash dishes. I give you four dollars a week."

"And meals?"

"You eat."

"All right," Ina said grimly, "I'll work. . . ."

WHEN STEVE rode out to the south end of the Hoodlum Hills with Shorty Grant he found them already black with Grouse Creek cattle. Tim Bell had wasted no time.

They rode through the cattle and presently encountered three riders. Two of them, Hub Wilson and Guy Trotter, were a pair of local toughs. They hadn't seen the third man. Bob Ord, until recently, but he bore all the outward signs of a professional gunman.

"You fellows are letting your cows a little off your range, aren't you?" Steve asked when they stopped.

"Don't think so," Wilson grinned. "This is free graze. We'll have a couple thousand more here in a day or so."

Steve said evenly, "This happens to be our range. If you won't turn 'em back we will." He was watching Bob Ord, and he wasn't surprised when the fellow went for his gun.

He spurred, and as his horse leaped ahead, Steve hooked a hard fist past the saddlehorn and into the fellow's belly. Ord's gun was out, but he doubled over with a pained grunt. Steve swung his horse's breast against the side of Ord's mount and continued to spur. His mount was the heavier, and the other animal went off balance. It's legs got mixed up and it went down on its side so suddenly that Ord's leg was caught underneath, and the man's head hit the earth with a thump. Steve's horse cleared the other with a tremendous jump.

Steve's gun was in his hand as he spun his mount around. So was Shorty Grant's. Wilson and Trotter had delayed their draw a little too long as they watched the scrimmage, and Shorty had the drop.

Ord's horse bounded to its feet, but Ord wasn't with it. He took a second thought about using his gun when he looked up into Steve's.

"Drop that gun and get up," Steve snapped.

"Can't. Hurt my ankle," Ord snarled.

He dropped the gun and fairly bounded to his feet as Steve's bullet struck the gravel almost between his fingers. There was nothing seriously wrong with his ankle.

Steve realized that in dealing with a man like Bell the initiative meant everything. Bell had taken it, and if allowed to keep it the fight would be lost. He ordered the other two to drop their guns to the ground, and made Ord get on his horse.

He said, "You fellows seem to have the idea that you're playing with boys. Well, you're dealing with men. Now turn those

cows back toward the flat. Shorty, you see that they do it."

Shorty grinned. "That I will. Git goin', gunmen. I'm behind on my target practice and I'd like to see how close I can come to your ears without parting your hair." He looked as if he meant it.

"One minute," Steve said. "Where's Bell?"

"At his camp on Grouse Creek," Wilson said reluctantly.

"I'm going over there," Steve said. "Put these hombres to work—and don't let 'em scatter on you."

Steve was lucky enough to find Tim Bell alone, except for Lem Buckle, at his luxurious camp on Grouse Creek.

"Well, this is a surprise," Bell drawled. "Light and rest your saddle."

"This isn't exactly a social call," Steve said. "I see some of your cattle have strayed into the Hoodlums."

"Not strayed," Bell drawled. "I ordered my men to put them there."

"And I countermanded the order. When I left there three of your men were driving them back."

"I don't believe it."

"It's true. Of course we had to persuade them to leave their guns on the ground, and one of my boys is seeing that they do the work." Steve smiled innocently.

Incredulity and anger struggled for supremacy on Bell's face. "I don't believe it," he said loudly. "What kind of a bluff you trying to pull, Fernall?"

Coldly, Steve said, "No bluff at all, Bell. Your men happened to be Ord, Wilson, and Trotter. Ord made a play to kill me and missed his connections. I mean business when I say that I mean to keep you out of the Hoodlums."

Before Bell could answer he was riding away. In a way he was bluffing, yet he had meant what he said.

When Steve was a hundred yards away Bell turned to Lem Buckle. "You claim to be a dead shot with a rifle," he ground out. "I'll give you five hundred dollars to kill that man."

Lem rushed over to pick up his rifle.

"Not now, you fool," Bell said hastily. "Do you want to get yourself hanged? Ride into the Hoodlums and lay for him. When you shoot, be sure nobody sees you, and be damned sure that you don't miss."

SHORTY GRANT had done a good job of herding. Bell's cattle hadn't got far into the hills, and by the time Steve returned many of them were back on the flats, and the others turned the other way. Most of Bell's men were gathering another herd, so Shorty had met no opposition.

On his way, Steve stopped and gathered up the three sixguns the men had dropped. He carried them a quarter of a mile then dropped them down a badger hole. He was smiling cheerfully when he overtook them.

"You're doing right well, boys," he told them genially. "Just keep 'em moving the same direction."

Steve and Shorty sat their horses and watched the disarmed desperados ride away. Presently they saw them change their course and gallop back toward the place they had lost their guns.

"I doubt if they'll look in the right place," Steve said. "Just to make sure they didn't have any alibi to Bell, I dropped their guns in a badger hole."

Shorty laughed. "That's where they would like to drop me," he said. "Those were the most reluctant cowpokes I ever saw."

Steve said soberly, "We're in for trouble. Bell means business, and we won't get the drop on his gunfighters again."

They rode back to their own camp and had supper with the other eight members of the crew. Steve made a little talk. "From now on," he told them, "I don't want anybody riding alone, and don't let those fellows come too close. We'll dog back their cattle every chance we get, but don't do any shooting unless it's in self-defense, because that's the very thing they'd like to crowd us into."

There were four dogs in the outfit, all of them trained to whip the most obstreperous cow. Three of them were "heelers," and could nip a cow's heels, dodge her frantic kick, and slip back in for

another nip. The fourth, a shaggy Airedale, was more vicious. His favorite hold was a cow's tail. He would grab it high up, and hang on till he gradually slid down to the end, leaving a trail of blood, and driving his victim crazy with pain and fear.

The next day Steve and his men found quite a number of Grouse Creek cattle still in the Hoodlums. They turned them back and turned loose the dogs. Once Badge caught a cow by the tail its frenzied bawling immediately started the other cattle in its vicinity to running. With the other dogs nipping at their heels the entire herd was soon at a dead run, and a fair-sized stampede was under way.

The cowhands rode along behind, watching for Bell's riders, and they weren't deceived because they failed to see any. Bell had riders there who knew what was going on, but apparently they didn't know what action to take. They couldn't stop the stampede before it hit the flats, and they couldn't shoot the dogs without getting within gun range of the riders who came behind.

They saw riders out on the flats later in the day but no immediate effort was made to invade the Hoodlums again. After a week of watching Steve returned to the ranch.

After Steve had given his report, Bill Fernall said, "Marv Jensen dropped by to notify us to appear before some commissioner from Washington to show cause why we shouldn't divide our range with the Grouse Creek Cattle Company."

"When?"

"Next month. They've also charged Marv with giving us more range than we're entitled to, so he won't be any good to us as a witness," Bill said. "And I've also been served papers in old man Buckle's case."

"Think I'll go to town tomorrow," Steve said.

"Yeah, you've been away from Roberta quite a while."

Steve was reminded that he had scarcely given Roberta a thought for a week. But the wagon-tramp girl had been in his mind often. "I wasn't thinking about Roberta," he said. "I'm going to smoke Hy Cassidy out of his hole. Tim Bell hasn't got brains enough to plan the steal they're trying."

WITHIN two days Ina was promoted to waitress. She was energetic and quick to learn, and old Lee Fong was pleased. She was also learning a little self-discipline—after she had blown up a couple of times when male customers got too fresh.

Her father complained, "It ain't fitten that you—practically the daughter of a millionaire—should be working for a heathen Chinese." He did not object, however, to having his meals paid for out of her wages. He had drunk up all the money that Cassidy had given him, and Cassidy had clamped down.

One day Ina overheard two customers, strangers to her, talking about her father. One said, "That old buzzard is as big a booze-hound as old Windy Jake. Bums everybody in the saloons for drinks, while he tells 'em how he's soon going to be a millionaire."

The other man said. "Everybody knows that so-called grant he's got ain't worth the paper it's wrote on, and old Windy Jake would have sold it for a drink of whisky if anybody had made him an offer. What I can't see is why a real-estate sharp like Hy Cassidy could be taken in."

The first speaker laughed. "Don't think for a minute he is. It's just a wrinkle he's using to try to horn in on Diamond F range. It's a clear steal, and whoever owns that Grouse Creek outfit is putting up all the money, not Cassidy."

Doubts concerning the worth of the land grant had been growing in Ina's mind for some time. Now she was reluctantly convinced that the whole thing was a hoax. She knew that Lee Fong had been in Juniper for a quarter of a century. She had a talk with him, and for the first time learned the true character of her uncle Jake. Steve Fernall and his uncle, Lee assured her, were fine and honest men. She couldn't doubt that the old man was telling her the truth.

Her cheeks crimsoned when she reflected

that her father was nothing but a barfly whom everyone despised.

She went back to the wagon, where she still slept, determined to tell her father what she thought. But when she arrived there Lem was back. He was dressed in new range clothes, and he was bragging that a brand new saddle and an expensive rifle belonged to him.

"How did you get so prosperous all of a sudden?" she demanded skeptically.

"Advance on my wages," Lem grinned.

"I don't believe it. They've had time to find out that you won't work."

"I don't have to do a thing," Lem boasted. "I'm special."

"Tommyrot!"

"Why ain't he?" Henry Buckle said angrily. "He's my son, ain't he? In a little while I'll own that Diamond F, an' Lem'll be running the outfit."

Such a picture made Ina laugh. "Lem couldn't run one old muley cow," she said scornfully. "He never earned a cent in his life."

"What did you ever earn?" Lem retorted. "Four dollars a week from a Chinaman. Hah!"

"I got raised to eight, in just two days," Ina said proudly.

"Listen to her, Pap," Lem scoffed. "Well, I kin make five hundred dollars in one minute. What d'you think of that?"

"Hush up, Lem," Buckle admonished quickly. "Things like that ain't to be talked about."

"Well, she makes me so damn mad," Lem said. "She wouldn't have to be working, either, if she had any sense. Tim Bell told me himself she could be living on easy street if she'd just be nice to him."

"If he ever speaks to me again I'll kill him," Ina said fiercely.

"Now you don't wanta feel that way, Iny," her father remonstrated. "Mr. Bell is a mighty fine man."

Disgusted, she crawled under the wagon cover, removed the shoes from her aching feet and stretched out in her narrow bed.

She could hear the mumble of their voices, and several times she heard the words "five hundred dollars" repeated. She moved her position so that she could hear better.

Presently she heard her father say, "It's risky business, Lem, an' you be sure nobody sees you do it. If it was anybody but that Fernall fellow I'd say let it alone, but I reckon Mr. Bell knows what he's doing."

"There won't be no danger, an' I've aimed to kill that one anyway, ever since he hit me with that rope," Lem said.

INA DROPPED BACK on her pillow, sickened by what she had overheard. They hadn't meant her to hear it; and yet it wouldn't have worried them, for they thought she would see it as they did.

She knew exactly what they meant. Tim Bell had promised Lem five hundred dollars to murder Steve Fernall. If she threatened to tell what she knew they would laugh at her. And Lem wouldn't be above killing her to keep her mouth shut.

If ever a family was no good, she thought, it was the Buckles—and she was a Buckle. She realized that she couldn't go on as she had been doing.

She was busy in the restaurant kitchen next day when Steve Fernall came in and sat down facing the door. She came up to take his order before they recognized each other.

"Hello," Steve said. "I didn't know you were working here."

She reacted toward him as she always had. "Well, I am," she said defensively. "What do you want to eat?"

"Make it ham and eggs," he smiled. "And please don't pepper it with so much temper."

When she returned to the kitchen, Lee went out, saw Steve, and stopped to talk. Steve learned how long she had been working there, and that Lee was well pleased with her.

When Ina brought his food she refused to look at him, but he was amazed to see that she had dropped a note under the edge of the plate. He waited until she had returned to the kitchen before reading it.

The note read, "Meet me down in the cottonwoods below our camp after dark tonight."

He frowned. It could be a trick of some kind which his enemies had put her up to, but somehow he couldn't believe that. When Ina came to his table again he said quietly, "I'll be there."

Steve wasn't surprised to find Hy Cassidy with Roberta when he entered White's store after leaving the restaurant.

"Steve!" Roberta cried. "This *is* a surprise." Apparently she had forgotten their disagreement, for she gave him her quick, birdlike kiss. He wondered, however, if she did it just to make Cassidy jealous.

"Maybe I'd better go," Cassidy said

"No, you're the man I want to see," Steve said. "Of course we can talk in your office if you'd rather."

"You've decided to accept a division of the range?"

"No, we'll never divide it. But if you can win Buckle's lawsuit for him you can have it all. We'll throw in the cattle."

"I believe Buckle has a case," Cassidy said.

"Look, Cassidy, why don't you come clean? You know, and everybody else knows, he has no case whatever. You've put up a few dollars so you can claim to the government that there may be a flaw in our title. Your real case depends on whether you can throw us out of the Hoodlums, and that will mean killing. If the owners of the Grouse Creek company knew what you and Bell were up to I doubt if they'd stand for it."

"It so happens, Fernall," Cassidy said coolly, "that I am the owner."

"And it so happens," Steve returned, "that I've thought so all along. I wondered why you were being so coy." He could see by Roberta's lack of surprise that she had been aware of Cassidy's ownership. That made him angry.

"As a matter of fact I've just recently taken it over," Cassidy said.

Steve guessed that Cassidy and Bell had probably played up the difficulty of getting range so that Cassidy could buy cheaply. They would play it both ways.

"Anyway, I know now who I'm fighting," Steve said, "and it almost makes it a pleasure."

He started to leave, but Roberta stopped him. "Steve, don't be unreasonable," she pleaded. "You say yourself that there'll be killing. You don't want that, and neither do I. If you'll sell half your cattle Hy will drop that lawsuit, and he'll pay you something for your range."

"I hate to," Cassidy said, "but Roberta has talked me into it. I'll give you five thousand dollars."

"I've never taken money yet for ducking a fight, and I'm not starting now," Steve told them.

Roberta said angrily, "Steve Fernall, if you persist in being so hardheaded I'm through with you." She jerked his ring from her finger and handed it to him.

"Want to buy this, Cassidy?" Steve asked. "It looks like you'll be needing it."

Nobody said anything and he went out.

SOON AFTER DARK Steve rode out of town, then altered his course and left his horse some distance below the cottonwoods Ina had mentioned. Aware that he might be walking into a trap he moved cautiously, alert for the slightest sign of movement. He was caught off guard when the girl moved suddenly from behind a tree not six feet from him.

"You don't need to be scared," she said. "I'm alone."

"There must be Injun blood in you," he smiled. "I'd have sworn there was nobody behind that tree. How are you, Miss Buckle?"

"I'm all right." He was the only man who had ever raised his hat to her, or called her Miss Buckle. She looked calm, but she was inwardly flustered.

"Just what did you want to see me about?"

"I wanted to tell you that somebody has been offered five hundred dollars to kill you."

Steve whistled. "Fancy me being worth that kind of money," he said.

"You'd better not laugh," she said. "I mean it."

"I'm not laughing," he said. "Let's go over and sit on that log and you tell me about it."

"I've told you all I can," she said, but she sat down reluctantly on one end of the dead cottonwood log.

"If I don't know who is after my scalp there's nothing much I can do to defend myself," Steve said, seating himself. "In a deal like that somebody has to pay the money and somebody accept it. Who are they?"

"I—I can't tell you any more."

"Considering the way you hate me I'm surprised you told me anything."

"I don't hate you," she said dully. "I hate myself."

"Whoa! A pretty girl like you shouldn't be having such thoughts," he remonstrated.

"Why not? I know I'm no good. I'm a Buckle, a hillbilly. I know everybody is laughing at us. I wish I was dead."

"Now, wait a minute, Ina," Steve said earnestly. "You don't have to believe it, but I admire you. I know you people have been tricked, but anybody with the spunk you've got can make something of themselves in this country. I'd like to help you."

To his consternation she burst into tears. When she didn't stop he moved along the log and gingerly put his arm around her, and drew her head down against his shoulder. She didn't resist.

She straightened up presently, drew her sleeve across her eyes and sniffed a few times. "I'm all right now," she said. "It—it's just that you're the first man who ever spoke politely to me in my life."

Steve said, "You poor kid," and kissed her gently upon the brow. A few days ago she would have stuck a knife into him for that, but now she didn't move. "See here, Ina," he said, "why don't you come out to the ranch and work for us. Mrs. Harvey, our housekeeper, needs help, and we've never been able to get a girl to stay out there because it's so far from town." He was thinking mostly of getting her away from her drunken father and that miserable covered wagon.

"What'll you pay?"

"How about forty dollars a month and your board and room?"

"I'll take it—if Lee Fong will let me off."

"I'll fix it with Lee," Steve assured her. "I'll send a rig in for you tomorrow."

Steve was halfway to the ranch before he remembered that she had told him nothing more definite about the threat to his life than that there was a price on his head. It was probably all she knew, but he had little doubt that his would-be assassin was Bob Ord. It didn't occur to him that it was her brother Lem.

INA DIDN'T TELL her father she had a new job. He would have made a big fuss, but once she got away he couldn't bring her back. Nevertheless, she told Lee Fong to give him credit for five dollars a week in meals, but no money.

"You good gal," Lee said. "Steve, he good man. Mebbe some day you be Missee Fernall."

"You're crazy," Ina said, looking flustered.

She returned to the wagon at noon, and wrote a brief note to her father, telling him her plans.

She also told him she knew what Lem was up to.

When a man drove up presently in a buckboard and asked if she was ready to go she tossed her bundle into the back of the rig and climbed up beside him.

She was a little disappointed, and a little relieved, that Steve wasn't at the ranch to greet her. Bill Fernall received her kindly enough, hiding his mental reservations, and introduced her to Mrs. Harvey, a motherly woman who showed her the room she was to occupy.

Never had the girl known such luxury. There was a hardwood bed with a soft mattress, clean sheets and pillows. There were curtains at the window, a closet for her clothes, an easy chair, and a carpet on the floor.

"There's plenty of hot water if you'd like to take a bath," Mrs. Harvey said.

Ina lay in the tub and soaked. It was the first bathtub she had ever seen.

She was eager to work, eager to prove her worth, but she had much to learn. That first day under Mrs. Harvey's supervision was a strain, and she was dead-tired when

she went to bed, and worried lest she had failed to meet approval.

But Mrs. Harvey said to Bill Fernall that evening, "She's a good girl. She has much to learn, but she catches on quickly."

Bill said nothing as he sucked on his pipe reflectively. He wondered why his nephew had brought the girl to the ranch. Roberta wasn't going to like it, and Bill wasn't sure that he did. No parent could have thought more of a son than he did of Steve, and he didn't want to see him get involved. He wasn't particularly fond of Roberta White, but she would be a good match for Steve, and he hated to see anything happen that would break it up.

A couple of days later a rider came in at a gallop, had a talk with Bill, and Ina saw them loading the buckboard with bedding and first-aid materials. She stood back, not wanting to intrude, but filled with a horrible fear that something had happened to Steve.

Finally she got a chance to ask Mrs. Harvey what had happened.

"There's been trouble on the range, and a man was shot."

"Was—was it Steve?" Ina had to ask.

Mrs. Harvey glanced at her shrewdly. "No, it wasn't Steve," she replied. "It was Harry Bean, and he was only shot in the leg." Mrs. Harvey didn't miss the girl's relief.

A little after dark Steve and Levi Handy got back to the ranch with the wounded puncher. Handy had been with Bean, trying to turn a bunch of Grouse Creek cattle, when they had been surprised by some of Bell's men. In the fracas Bean had been shot. He had been able to stay on his horse until they reached camp.

After they made Harry Bean comfortable in the house, and while they were waiting for the doctor to come from Juniper, Steve went into the kitchen to talk to Ina.

"You want to tell me now who was going to get that money for bumping me off?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I can't. But Tim Bell was the man who would pay it," she said with an unexpected burst of feeling.

"You sound like you didn't like Bell."

"I hate him! Once I would have cut his heart out if he hadn't made me drop my knife."

"Whew! A man has to be careful around you, doesn't he?" Steve smiled. "How do you like it here?"

Her eyes were bright as she said, "I didn't know I could like a place so much. Thank you for giving me this job. I don't know much yet, but I'll learn."

"I'm sure you will, Ina. By the way, I saw your brother with Bell's men today. He was certainly decked out."

"Mighty little *work* they'll get out of him," she said acidly. She wanted to warn Steve to beware of Lem, but she was still a Buckle and clannish loyalty was strong. And now that the shooting had started on the range she told herself that Steve would be careful anyway.

AT BREAKFAST the next morning Steve couldn't keep his eyes off her as she passed back and forth between dining room and kitchen while waiting on table. He had never seen such a transformation from what she had been when he first saw her. She was neat and pretty, and she moved with a lithe grace.

Bill Fernall remarked, "Better not look that way too long—it might be hard to stop. . . ."

Tim Bell had thrown his cattle into the Hoodlums again, and this time he had with them more men than Steve could muster. The shooting of Harry Bean showed that he meant business.

Steve was troubled as he rode back on the range. Unless he kept Cassidy and Bell's cattle out of the Hoodlum Hills he was certain they would win in the forthcoming hearing. That would mean that he and Bill would have to cut down their cattle by half this year, perhaps more next. Eventually, they would have to go out of the cattle business entirely.

On the other hand he dreaded an encounter that might get some of his men killed, and his foes had the advantage that a range war, even if they lost it, would be to their advantage when the government man made his decision.

He collected his men and rode out toward the cattle. By now some of them were mixed with his own. They saw some of Bell's men at a distance, and they were moving in more cattle.

Steve planned another stampede which might or might not work. They rounded up a small bunch that were at the head of Cassidy's herd, penned them in against a cliff, and while some of the boys held them there Steve and two or three of the best ropers tied down some twenty head, and fastened tin cans filled with pebbels to their tails.

They cut the cattle loose, gave them a start toward the lower country and set the four dogs on them. With the rattling tin cans banging on their heels the animals went mad with fright. Bawling and bellowing, they charged into the cattle below, and with the dogs to add to their panic the thing became contagious, and soon, instead of a mere twenty head stampeding for their lives there were hundreds in the mad race.

The Buckles gave up and returned to Juniper

Steve and his men rode out on a high ridge to watch. There was nothing more they could do, and they couldn't even call back their own dogs. They saw Bell's men, at least a dozen of them, ride out and try to check the stampede, but it was completely out of hand. The Grouse Creek men turned and rode with the stampede, hoping to get the cattle to milling when they struck the flats.

"Come on, boys," Steve said. "Let's see if we can stop the dogs before they get down there and get killed."

They left the ridge at a dead run, and galloped down a draw. Steve, riding hard with the rest, suddenly felt the smack of a bullet against the back of his saddle, and an instant later heard the crack of a rifle. He reached back of the cantle and felt a ragged tear in the leather. Two inches higher and that bullet would have shattered his spine.

Shorty Grant and Levi Handy pulled up with him. Some of the others looked around, but he motioned them to go on. He told Shorty and Levi to ride back up the canyon, and spurred his own horse straight up the ridge.

He could see no sign of the bushwhacker when he reached the top. The fellow hadn't come this way, and he couldn't have gone the other without being seen by Shorty and Levi. He concluded, therefore, that he might still be lurking in the brushy draw from which he had fired the shot. He left his horse and ran down the draw on foot.

He came suddenly upon a horse tied in the brush. He dived behind a bush as he heard hard breathing. A moment later Lem Buckle came into sight.

STEVE waited until Lem reached for the reins, then stepped out. "Reach high, Lem," he ordered grimly.

Caught completely off guard, and astounded at seeing the man he thought he had killed, Lem froze, and then lifted both hands high.

"So you're the lad Bell was going to pay five hundred for bumping me off," Steve said grimly.

Lem's eyes widened and an expression of astonishment covered his dull face. "How'd you know that?" he blurted out. Then he caught himself and yelled, "It's a lie! I don't know what you're talking about."

Steve picked up the new rifle Lem had dropped. It reeked of freshly burned powder. "Don't think you've got the sights quite right, Lem," he said. "Three inches higher and you'd have got me."

Lem jumped when Steve fired three shots into the air to call Shorty and Levi.

"You were luckier than you know," Steve said. "If you had killed me, you'd hang; now you may get off with a few years in the pen. Or you might get off altogether, if you want to tell the truth." But Lem had turned sullen and refused to answer.

"Why don't we hang the so-and-so right here?" Shorty Grant demanded when he and Levi arrived.

"He deserves it, but I've got proof he was hired to drygulch me so maybe a few years in the pen will cool him off," Steve said. "I'm going to take him in. You go down and keep the other boys out of trouble. We've done enough for one day. If Bell and his men come looking for trouble you fellows keep out of sight."

Just to make certain that Lem didn't try anything Steve tied his hands behind him, and led his horse. His first stop was at the ranch.

Only Ina saw the two men ride into the yard. She rushed out, her eyes big with anxiety as she saw that Lem was a prisoner.

"Steve, did—did—he do something?" she stammered.

"Just tried to earn that five hundred Bell promised him," Steve replied matter-of-factly. "You can see by the back of my saddle how close he came."

Ina saw the ragged tear in the leather. Steve had escaped death by the merest margin, and if he had been killed she felt that she, too, would have died. Then anger against her brother flamed through her.

"Oh, you fool, you coward," she blazed. "I hope they send you to prison for life. You'd kill a man like Steve for five hundred dollars. Bell was a fool. You'd have done it for fifty cents, you're that cheap."

"You told!" Lem bellowed. "Wait till Pap hears about this."

Bill and Mrs. Harvey had arrived by that time and they heard how close Steve had come to death.

"I guess we could have expected it," Bill said.

"I could," Steve said. "Ina warned me. If she'll swear that Bell was the man who offered Lem the money to get me I think we've got this range war won."

"I'll swear it," Ina promised promptly.

"You'll be sorry," Lem ground out.

"That's all I want," Steve said. "I'll take Lem in and turn him over to the sheriff. It'll be too late for any hearing today, but you bring Ina in tomorrow, Bill."

"Sure, I'll bring her," Bill promised.

THE SHERIFF was in bed when Steve awakened him and explained matters through an open window. "Wait till I get dressed and I'll be with you in a minute," Sheriff Neeley said.

"So Bell has taken to drygulching, has he?" he queried when he came out. "And this rooster is the son of the old bum who claims he's got a hold on your land."

"I guess five hundred looked like a lot of money to him," Steve said.

"It's a lie. I wanta see my pap," Lem roared.

"All right, son, I'll put you in the cell next to him," the sheriff grinned.

"You got Buckle in jail?" Steve exclaimed.

"Yep. Claimed his daughter had left some money for him with Lee Fong, and tried to wreck the place when Lee wouldn't come across."

With Lem safely lodged in jail Steve had nothing to do but rent a room and go to bed. He thought quite a lot about Ina Buckle. This was a big break for him, provided the girl's story stood up. With Tim Bell in prison for conspiracy to commit murder, Hy Cassidy's whole campaign would collapse.

He didn't doubt for a minute that Ina would tell the truth. He hadn't altogether overlooked the adoration that had been in her eyes, and it worried him.

Steve found himself much in the public eye the next day. News of the attempt to murder him had emanated from the courthouse, and his friends wanted to know all about it. All he would tell them was that he had caught the sniper and that he was now in jail. A steady stream of men went down to the livery stable to view Steve's saddle and they returned with angry, muttering voices.

Some of them were the very men who had jokingly told Henry Buckle that his absurd claim to the Fernall ranch was valid, but now they were in a mood to lynch both Buckle and his son, a suggestion which Steve quickly vetoed.

The whole thing was blamed on the Buckles. Steve had told no one except Sheriff Neeley that he meant to prove Lem had been paid by Tim Bell, and the sheriff had promised to keep quiet about it.

Lem Buckle was to be arraigned at two o'clock that afternoon, and Pilton, Hy Cassidy's lawyer, would of course defend him. Steve knew his entire case depended upon Ina.

He would be edgy until she got to town and he had another talk with her, and that wouldn't be before noon.

Just before that time he was having a beer in the Oneida saloon when a boy handed him a note. He opened it and read, "Dear Steve. I must see you at once. It is very important. Roberta."

He rolled the paper into a ball and threw it into a spittoon. Roberta was the last person he wanted to see just now, and he was minded to ignore the summons. But he took a second thought and walked over to the store.

HY CASSIDY was in the little enclosed office with Roberta. She didn't greet him with a kiss, but her attitude was one of kindly forgiveness.

"Come in, Steve," she said. "I'll lock the door so we won't be interrupted."

"What's the great secret?" he asked curtly.

"There isn't any secret; and please, Steve, take that chip off your shoulder," she said, smiling.

"I'll wait till I know what you want."

"I don't want anything—except to help you."

"That's mighty kind," he said sarcastically.

Cassidy spoke up. "What Roberta wants to do is keep you from making a fool of yourself, Fernall."

"If that's all—" he said, and started to leave his chair.

"Steve, sit down," Roberta said patiently, and he reluctantly resumed his chair. She went on, "If you try to prove that Tim Bell offered that fellow money to shoot you, you'll be the laughingstock of the town."

"How do you figure that?" Steve asked. "What do you know about it anyway?"

"Hy's attorney, Mr. Pilton, talked with young Buckle and he told Pilton what you threatened to do. If that awful girl—"

"Just unlock the door," Steve interrupted harshly. "I've heard enough."

Roberta made no move toward the door. "All right," she said, "if you're so touchy about the Buckle girl I'll apologize. But if she told you that, she lied."

"Because," Cassidy said, "the only money young Buckle got I gave him."

"I didn't suppose Bell would pay it out of his own pocket, since you own the cattle and are the one that would profit by my death," Steve said.

"But that wasn't the purpose," Roberta said. "Hy has been putting up money for the Buckles as part of their agreement about suing on that land grant."

"Which both of you know is pure fake," Steve said angrily. "If that's all—"

"It isn't all," Roberta said, her cheeks getting redder. "In spite of your stubborn

stupidity I still want to help you. You were stampeding cattle that didn't belong to you, and on range that you don't own. The Buckle boy was working for Hy and Mr. Bell. He didn't know anything about cattle, but he had been told that the best way to stop a stampede was to shoot as close to the cattle as he could. He says that that was what he was doing, and he didn't even see you. It was an accident."

They had talked it over pretty carefully, Steve thought. All of a sudden he realized how blind he had been. He had thought Roberta was interested in helping Cassidy to the extent of getting Steve to split his range and half his cattle so that he would go into business in Juniper where Roberta wanted to live. She wanted more than that. She wanted Hy Cassidy to get all the Diamond F—and she wanted Hy Cassidy. Cassidy had more money, and he would operate the ranch from town. Money and power was what Roberta wanted, and she had only been waiting for the right moment to break their engagement.

He said abruptly, "Cassidy, how would you like to buy us out completely?"

A joyful look came over Roberta's face. "That would be the simplest solution of the whole thing."

"And then we might take over your father's business and expand," Steve said.

The calculating look was back in the big blue eyes. "Well, I don't know—our engagement is broken."

"I see. In that case I'm not interested."

ROBERTA looked at Cassidy, and a veiled look passed between them. She said, as if impulsively, "All right, if that's the only way to settle this difficulty, give me back my ring."

"You mean lend it to you, don't you?" Steve asked cynically. "As soon as Cassiday gets what he wants you'd give it back to me, and then marry him."

"I've never been so insulted," Roberta cried.

"Take it easy, honey," Cassidy said. "I'm tired of stalling. Roberta and I are going to get married. You were a fool to think you ever did stand a chance, and you're a fool if you think you can buck me on the range. You'd better sell out now while you have the chance, because I'll never make you another offer."

As Cassidy talked Roberta reached over and slipped her plump, white hand into his, and her eyes were coldly baleful as she looked at Steve.

Steve said to her. "I never had any intention of selling anything. I just wanted to make sure where you stood. Now I know." He stepped over and rattled the locked door. "Open this thing before I bust it down," he ordered.

"One moment, before you go," Cassidy said, stepping belligerently in front of Steve. "Up to now we've just been showing you what we could do. Now we're going to do it. Before I'm through I'll break you."

The jutting chin of the fat face was too much temptation. Steve hit it, and Cassidy went spinning across the room to land in a heap in the corner. Steve stepped back and with one hard kick smashed the flimsy lock of the door. He strode out through the astonished customers, while the ladylike Roberta screamed curses at him that would have made a cowhand blush.

A little later he ran across his uncle. "Where's Ina?" he demanded.

Bill replied. "I let her off at her pap's wagon. She wouldn't go to the hotel. I told her you'd pick her up there later."

It seemed a foolish thing to have done, but Steve only said, "Will she stick by her story? Did she say anything?"

"Yeah, she promised to tell the truth, but with a girl like that you never can tell," Bill said dubiously. He had a hang-dog look that Steve didn't like. And that was unusual for Bill.

"I think I'll go down and see her," Steve said. But before they separated a man rushed up to tell them that Henry Buckle lay dead at his wagon.

A crowd had collected at the wagon by the time they reached there. Henry Buckle lay exactly where he had fallen, on his back with the back of his head on the iron gooseneck at the end of the wagon tongue.

The sheriff and the coroner were there ahead of them, and the latter was questioning Ina. To Steve's annoyance and apprehension Tim Bell was holding Ina's arm and almost seemed to be prompting her.

Steve heard her say, with a hint of desperation in her voice, "He just came to the wagon drunk like he often does. When he got right here he stumbled and fell."

"Did you turn him over, or try to pick him up?" the sheriff asked.

"No, I didn't touch him," the girl shuddered. "I left him right where he fell."

Tim Bell spoke up, "That's the truth Sheriff. Me and Bob Ord rode up right behind him and saw the whole thing."

The coroner said, "Well, if there was three witnesses who swear it was an accident I don't think there's any need for an inquest."

Steve pressed forward, "When did he get out of jail, Sheriff?" he asked.

"A couple of hours ago; long enough for him to get drunk, I reckon."

Steve stepped over to Ina. "I want to talk to you, Ina," he said.

"She's got nothing to say to you, Fernall," Tim Bell rasped. "And she's not going to testify to that lie that you've been trying to get her to tell."

"I wasn't talking to you, Bell," Steve said curtly. "Listen to me, Ina—"

"I don't want to talk to you," she said. "I won't testify to anything."

STEVE would have said more, but his uncle grasped him firmly by the arm and steered him away from the crowd.

"Don't take it too hard," Bill said. "It was too much to expect that a girl of her kind would stick by the truth."

"Something happened. She didn't change her story willingly."

"Look, Steve. You didn't fall for that little wagon tramp, did you?" Bill asked anxiously.

"I don't know," Steve replied. "But this means our case falls through. We can't implicate Bell, and Lem Buckle will go free."

"We'd just as well look facts in the face," Bill said. "We don't want a range war, and we couldn't win it if we did. Best thing is to see Hy Cassidy and make some sort of a deal with him."

"You see him," Steve said angrily. "It's your property, and I'm quitting your outfit as of right now."

Before Bill Fernall could answer Steve was gone. . . .

When Bill Fernall had told her night before what a fine marriage Steve was going to make with Roberta White, Ina had at first wondered why he was telling her all this. Then she realized he was telling her she had no chance with Steve, and that he would never approve even if Steve should become interested in her.

At first anger had stormed over her, but before she let the tempest break she realized that he was right. She had been foolish to even dream that Steve might care for her—yet she had dreamed it. She knew then that her short stay at the Fernall ranch, the most pleasant she had ever spent in her life, was at an end.

When she came out to the buckboard in the morning she was carrying all her scant belongings. "You're not coming back?" Bill asked.

"No."

"Well, we're sorry to lose you," Bill said with a twinge of conscience. "Anyway, I'm going to pay you twenty dollars extra."

She said fiercely, "I won't take it. I don't want anything I ain't earned."

"Very well. Will—will this make any difference in what you'll testify about your brother?" he asked.

"Of course not. I said I'd tell what I know, and I will."

He didn't press the matter further, and when she asked to be let off at her father's wagon he could offer no valid objection.

Seeing a heap of her father's dirty clothes on the floor of the wagonbed, she mechanically started a fire to heat water to wash them. She had just got the fire built when he arrived. For once he seemed to be sober.

"So you thought you'd better come home, eh?" he said. "I was gonna come out there an' get you."

"You call this a home?" she said bitterly.

"It'll do till we get set up in style out at my brother Jake's place."

"Can't you understand that that grant of his is no good, and never was?" she said wearily. "That man Cassidy is just making a monkey of you."

"You lie, gal," Buckle thundered. "And if you go on the stand an' lie about Lem likes he says you aim to I'll whip the daylights outa you."

"You'll never whip me again," she said steadily, "an' I'm going to tell the truth about Tim Bell promising Lem five hundred dollars to kill Steve Fernall—even if you kill me for it."

As she stepped past him he seized her, but she jerked him back. She was as strong as he was, and far more agile. They wrestled, and suddenly he fell backward, hitting his head on the iron, and she fell on top of him. She was up in an instant, but Henry Buckle lay there, his mouth open and his eyes glassy. She knew he was dead.

PANIC gripped her. She hadn't meant to hurt him; only to escape his clutches. She looked around wildly, hoping that no one had witnessed the scuffle—and she saw Tim Bell and Bob Ord grinning at her from their horses.

The men rode up and Bell swung down. "Well, I'll be jiggered," he said. "The old cuss is dead—and you killed him! That kind of puts you in a fix, beautiful."

"I did not!" she cried. "He fell." She backed away, but he followed her, smiling.

"Yeah, I know," he said softly. "He fell, all right—after you hit him in the back of the head with that ax."

"Yep, that's the way I saw it," Bob Ord volunteered.

Ina looked at them in horror. They would lie her right into a hangman's noose.

"You've got troubles, spitfire," Tim Bell said. "You were going to swear that I offered your fool brother five hundred dollars to kill Steve Fernall. Nobody would believe you, but if you do shoot off your mouth you'll hang for murdering your own father."

Ina glanced down at her father's face and shuddered. It had been a long time since she had felt any real affection for him, but she hadn't meant him any harm. She felt bewildered. She felt trapped.

"That doesn't need to happen," the inexorable voice went on. "All you have to do is say Fernall tried to bribe you to tell that lie, and Bob and me will swear that we saw your old man trip and hit his head on that wagon tongue."

Nothing seemed to matter much any more. She had foolishly allowed herself to fall in love with Steve Fernall, and his uncle had made it painfully plain that she wasn't good enough for him.

She didn't doubt for a moment that Bell could get her hanged. People would believe anything of a Buckle. The thought of what she would have to go through filled her with complete dismay.

"I'll not say that Steve tried to bribe me to lie," she said dully.

An angry look flashed across Bell's face, but Ord said quickly, "She means, Tim, that she'll deny the story, but won't implicate Fernall. That's fair enough."

"Okay. You got it straight now? All three of us say your dad was drunk and stumbled. And when they ask you if you know anything about me trying to get Fernall killed, you deny it."

Ina nodded dumbly. She had let Steve down, and nothing mattered any more.

"There's one thing more," Bell said, his voice sounding like the purr of a satisfied cat. "No matter what happens you're to stick right by me the rest of the day."

In a few minutes Ord was back with the sheriff. She told the story she had been told to tell. The worst was when Steve spoke to her, and she was glad that was swiftly over, but she would never forget the look of contempt in his eyes.

Presently she heard Tim Bell saying, "Lem's hearing has been postponed till tomorrow. You can't go back to the Fernall place, and you can't stay here, but I'll take care of you. You stay right here at the wagon until I finish up some business, and Bob will stick around to see that you don't talk to anybody."

At the moment all she wanted was to get inside the wagon, away from people.

They had taken her father away, and she wished Ord would leave, but at least she didn't have to talk to him.

IT WAS nearly sundown before Bell returned, and he was leading an extra horse for her to ride. "Come on," he said, "we'll go over to Lee Fong's and have supper."

She couldn't eat the food, and she was unresponsive to old Lee's attempts to make conversation. She couldn't rouse from her lethargy even when Bell snapped, "Go on, beat it, Lee. This is a private party."

Only when Bell told her to mount again did she balk. "Where do you want me to go?" she demanded.

"Why, out to my camp on Grouse Creek," he replied. "With your father dead and Lem in jail I've got to take care of you. You're going to be my woman, kitten, didn't you know that?"

"No! I won't be," she cried in panic.

"Shut up," he hissed, "or I'll knock you over the head. There's other women out there, if that's what you're thinking about. I'm giving you the best break you ever had in your life."

She let him help her into the saddle, and they rode away.

As they rode on, mile after mile, her worries increased. She was so tired that it was hard to stay in the saddle.

Bell called out at last, and Ord stopped. "Better turn off here, Bob," Bell said. "You know what to do."

"Right. Man, we'll show that outfit what a real stampede is. I only hope Steve Fernall himself is out there to ride into the trap," Ord answered.

For the first time since her father's death, Ina became alert. These men were laying a trap for Steve.

"What kind of a trap?" she demanded as Ord rode away.

"Bob was just talking," Bell laughed. "But we have a neat little surprise for our friend Fernall. If I didn't have you along I'd like to be there to see it."

"What's going to happen?"

"I guess I can tell you," he said, "but you'd damn well better not mention it. While Fernall has been stampeding our stuff he ain't had much time to look after his own. Right now three of my boys have got fifty head of cattle corralled right above his main herd. When Bob Ord sets off a signal fire those fifty head are going to come charging through his stuff to set off the damnedest stampede this range ever saw. And I got my idea right out of the Bible."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember how some geezer named Sampson caught himself a flock of foxes and turned 'em loose in the fields of the Philistines with their tails on fire? Well, that's what I'm doing to Fernall tonight, only it'll be wild steers. And the beauty of it is everybody will think Fernall did it himself, trying to stampede our stuff."

"You'd—set cows afire—alive?" Ina gasped.

"Sure," Bell laughed. "Dead ones can't run. Besides, they belong to Fernall."

Ina swung her pony around suddenly and kicked it desperately in the flanks. It was a lazy animal, and Bell grabbed her reins before she more than got started.

"Let me go," she cried, trying to strike his face with the reins.

Bell caught her wrist and twisted until she cried out with pain. "Cut it, now, or I'll break your arm."

"Blast you!" she said helplessly.

"So that's how the land lays," Bell breathed heavily after he had forced her to stop struggling. "Looks to me like you might have fallen for Steve Fernall. Have you?"

"None of your business," she hissed.

"Well, well. That puts a different light on things. I see I've got to watch you pretty close, just in case you might forget that I can still have you hanged for murdering your father."

THE GIRL slumped in the saddle. For the moment she had forgotten about that. Bell turned her horse about, and took the reins out of her hands. But she wasn't quite as cowed as she pretended. If there was any chance for her to get away she intended to take it. She kept trying

to remember what Bob Ord had said about a trap. She believed it meant danger for Steve or his men. She had let Steve down once, because she couldn't help it, but she would surely warn him about this new threat if she got the opportunity.

Finally they rode up to a large wall tent set back in a grove of quaking aspens, and stopped. There were no other tents or buildings around.

"Where's the families you said were here?" she demanded, when he told her to dismount.

"Just a mile or so up the creek," he grinned.

She called him a name, and he jerked her roughly out of the saddle. "Stand there till I tie these horses," he commanded. "Try running away and I'll break your lovely neck."

It came to her at last why he had brought her here. She looked about desperately. There were only a few trees; it would do her no good to try to run or hide.

Then, suddenly, she caught sight of a hatchet which someone had driven into a tree at the corner of the tent. As Bell's back was turned for a moment she stepped swiftly back, jerked the hatchet from the tree and thrust it under her jacket before he turned.

Bell came over and thrust her rudely into the tent. It was pitch-dark inside the tent, and as Bell lighted a lantern that swung from the ridge-pole he didn't know how close he came to getting his head split open. Ina was as tense and alert as a cornered wildcat.

"All right," Bell said calmly as he closed the chimney, "here's where we stay."

She had never been so desperately frightened. "I'd rather hang than let you touch me," she said between set lips. She backed away as he advanced, until her back touched the tent pole and she could go no farther.

Bell threw off his coat, laughed, and lunged for her. Her hand came out from under the jacket, and she swung with all her strength.

Bell threw up an arm and leaped backward, but not quite in time. He managed to deflect the blow, but the corner of the hatchet blade struck his forehead and slashed an ugly gash above his left eye. He reeled back toward the entrance of the tent, covered the cut with one hand and glared at her.

"You damned little rip," he cursed harshly, "I'll make you pay for that, plenty."

"If you touch me again I'll kill you," Ina warned ominously.

Not taking his eyes off her, Bell reached for a towel, doused it in a bucket of cold water and pressed it over his wound. "I ought to shoot you," he said, "and maybe I will—when I've finished with you."

"Go ahead," she invited. She had never wanted to live more than she did now, but he would have to kill her before she let him have his way. But until he moved she would have to stand there, hatchet in hand.

Bell sat upon a box, from time to time wringing out the bloody towel in the bucket and replacing it over the wound, all the time eying her appraisingly.

"I suppose you'd stand there and let me bleed to death," he said once.

"I'm hoping you will," she retorted grimly.

"You know," he said again, "I think I made a mistake. I like your spirit; you're really worth marrying. If you'll put down that blasted hatchet and fasten a bandage over this cut we'll be married tomorrow."

"I'd rather die."

Bell shrugged and said, "Well, if you won't help me I guess I'll have to help myself. I've got to have a bucket of clean water, but if you try to leave I'll shoot you down like a coyote."

The man staggered as if from weakness when he lurched to his feet, and his straying feet took him closer to the girl, until she raised the hatchet. He started to turn then, but as he did so he flung the bloody contents of the bucket squarely in her face, blinding her.

Ina gasped and dropped the hatchet, as she tried to wipe off her face. Then she found herself helpless in Tim Bell's powerful arms.

IN ONE MINUTE Steve's whole world had been cut from under him. Against all reason he had believed in Ina Buckle. If she had stuck to her story, Tim Bell and Hy Cassidy would have been proven instigators of murder and their campaign to seize the Hoodlum Hills would have come to a sudden end. Sheriff Neeley would have seen to that. And they wouldn't have stood a chance to horn in on the forest rights.

But the girl had turned her back on him, gone back on her word. He had been a fool to trust her.

When he cooled off a little Steve realized that Bill had been right. They had to make the best terms they could with Cassidy or plunge into a bloody range war which they had no prospect of winning. But he still didn't regret having told Bill he was through. After what had happened he simply could not bring himself to kneel to Hy Cassidy. It was Bill's business; let him close it out.

Bill still believed that Steve and Roberta would get married, and Steve wasn't minded to tell him the truth. Let him find it out for himself; it wouldn't be long.

There was no longer any reason for him to stay in the country. He would go somewhere and get a job. He'd have to go back to the ranch to get his things and say good-by to the boys, but he would wait until tomorrow until he had time to make some plans. They would ask a lot of questions, and he had to think up a few answers.

Though he tried to keep his mind off the subject, he kept trying to explain Ina's changed attitude. He couldn't believe that she had been actuated by greed, or that she had been a spy for his enemies all the time, as Bill doubtless believed.

She had told him about Tim Bell, and he believed that her hatred of the man was genuine. Yet she had been on the man's arm, and he had practically done all her talking for her. There was something wrong, but he didn't know what it was.

He went up to the courthouse and had a talk with Sheriff Neeley, but the old sheriff was no help.

"I know, and you know, that somebody put that Buckle kid up to shooting at you, but if we can't prove it he'll be turned loose. I don't know what you can do, Steve."

"I'm not going to do anything. Bill doesn't want a range war so he's going to sell out to Cassidy for what he can get. I've quit."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but Bill is right. If you try to keep Bell out of the Hoodlums you lose either way it goes, so there's no use getting anybody killed. What you aiming to do?"

"I don't know," Steve said. "I'm leaving the country."

"If we could prove they tried to get you murdered, I'd damned well see that they didn't do it again. But until then my hands are tied."

"I know how it is," Steve said.

He was about to enter the Oneida with the intention of getting a few drinks when his uncle called to him. Bill was in the buckboard, ready to start home.

"Any time you change your mind, Steve, I'll be glad to have you back," Bill said.

"Thanks, but I can't see any future here any more."

"Steve, I hope you won't be sore, but maybe it was my fault that girl changed her story. You see, your happiness means more to me than anything else. She was falling in love with you, and I was afraid you might be getting a little soft yourself. I knew it just wouldn't do, so I had a talk with her."

"So that's what it was," Steve said, trying to restrain his anger. "Well, it looks like you had talked yourself right into bankruptcy."

"It's not that bad," Bill defended himself. "I can make Cassidy pay me a fair price if I sell out to him, and with the money you can go into business here, like Roberta wants. And you two can get married."

"I've got news for you," Steve said. "Roberta is going to marry Hy Cassidy."

Before Bill Fernall could speak Steve had entered the saloon.

Steve found that he didn't want a drink. There was still something about what had

happened at the wagon that bothered him, and he needed a clear head to figure it out. He killed time during the afternoon, playing a little poker, his mind not on his cards. But the answer he sought still eluded him.

HE PLAYED until dark, then went over to Lee Fong's for supper. Old Lee himself waited on him. "How come you let Missee Ina get away?" the Chinese asked. "She good gal."

"Well maybe you can get her back if you think she's so much," Steve said irritably.

"No can do. She ride away with Tim Bell."

"She what? When?"

"After supper. She feel bad. Me think she no like to go."

Steve was suddenly interested. He began firing questions and learned that Ina had left town with Tim Bell and Bob Ord, about an hour earlier.

There was nobody at Bell's cowcamp but men. Why would she go there? If she had gone reluctantly, as Lee thought, then she had been under pressure—the same pressure that had caused her to save Bell's hide earlier in the day.

It must have something to do with her father's death. And then the answer he had been fumbling for all afternoon leaped suddenly into his brain. Without waiting to taste his food, he rushed out and ran to the livery stable to get his horse.

Henry Buckle's death had been no accident—or at least he hadn't died the way they said he had! A stumbling, drunken man didn't fall on his back. Invariably he fell on his face, and they had said that Buckle had hit the back of his head on the wagon tongue, and had not moved.

If Ina had killed her father, and he thought her quite capable of it under certain circumstances, and Bell and Ord had seen it, then they would have held it over her and forced her to do what they wanted her to do.

The thing that concerned him now was where they had taken her. He had a hunch it wouldn't be to the main camp. Tim Bell had had a private camp on Grouse Creek only a little while ago; the question was whether he was still there. Steve decided to see. If he wasn't there, he would go on to the main camp, even though he would be riding into a den of rattlesnakes. The only thing he knew for sure was that he had to find Ina.

Through the darkness he saw a light shining through a tent, and he knew that Bell was still there. He pulled his horse to a walk so that it couldn't be heard, and kept the trees between him and the tent. At the edge of them he dismounted and tied his horse. A moment later he caught sight of two struggling silhouettes revealed by the imperfect light of a lantern. One of them, he knew, was Ina.

He broke into a run, stopping just outside the tent. He heard Bell say harshly, "You little vixen, I'm going to tie you up till I bind up this head of mine, and then I'll show you just what a wagon tramp like you is good for."

Steve, gun in hand, threw back the flap of the tent. "Let go of her, Bell," he said.

Tim Bell reacted violently. He whirled the girl in front of him and went for his gun. Steve dared not fire, but Ina had to be hurt if she was to be saved. He plowed into the pair of them, knocking them off their feet and sprawling on top of them as he struck out to knock Bell's gun aside. The powder burned his face, but the bullet tore harmlessly through the roof of the tent. Before Bell could fire again Steve had a firm grasp on the barrel of the weapon.

Ina was caught between the two struggling men, and for a moment was clutched by blind panic. Bell struck at Steve with his free hand, and his forearm hit Ina's jaw hard enough to make her dizzy. Then Steve arched his body, caught the collar of her jacket, and managed somehow to heave her to one side.

PERHAPS Bell was weakened by loss of blood, but he couldn't point his gun toward Steve, nor could he roll his foe over. Steve, in freeing Ina, had lost his own gun, and it seemed to be under Bell. Presently, however, he got a knee on Bell's wrist and bore down until his foe let go of the gun. But Bell wasn't through.

Steve hadn't thought about a knife until he saw the snap of a spring blade. He heard Ina scream, and twisted his body desperately as Bell struck savagely at his breast. He felt the shock of burning pain as the five-inch blade entered his flesh. In sudden fury he seized his enemy's wrist and twisted the arm as Bell struck a second time. It was Bell's heart the knife entered with the strength of his own and Steve's arms behind it. For an instant Bell's face was transfixed by horror, then a hissing, gurgling sound issued from his lips as the life went slowly out of him.

Steve got slowly to his feet, almost unable to believe that the fight had ended this way. He felt his side and his hand came away wet with blood, but he felt no particular weakness. He had received no more than a painful gash.

"You all right, Ina?" he asked.

She nodded dumbly.

He pointed to the gash across Bell's forehead. "You did that?"

"I hit him with a hatchet," she said, shuddering.

Steve shook his head. He said, "What were you doing out here?"

Her answer was straightforward. "I had a fight with my father. I didn't mean to hurt him, but he stumbled and fell on the wagon tongue and it killed him. Tim Bell and Bob Ord saw it, and they said they would swear I hit Pap with an ax if I didn't do what they said."

"I figured it was something like that," he said, "but I was a little slow about it."

"I—I—didn't know he was going to do what he tried to do when he brought me out here," she said. "So—so—I tried to kill him."

Sobs had been gathering in her throat and suddenly they were uncontrollable. Steve took her in his arms.

"I wish I was dead," she got out at last.

"Here, that's no way to talk," he soothed. "I've got a little cut I want you to bandage up. Then we'll go back to the ranch. When you get your nerves settled you and I are going to get married."

She gazed at him blankly, unable to believe what she heard.

"If you will marry me," he said softly, "I love you, Ina."

"Git that shirt off so I can dress that cut," she said. "You must be out of your head."

Dressing his wound was the best way to get her settled down, and he didn't try to talk while she worked.

She washed the wound with clean water, into which he had poured a liberal amount of alcohol from a bottle on a shelf, and bound it up with strips from a sheet.

Then she said, "I'd be a disgrace to you. Besides, they'll hang me now for killing my father."

"Simpleton," he said. "Nobody will convict you if you just tell the truth. I meant what I said, Ina. You're the only woman I'll ever love."

"What about that fat blonde in the store?" she retorted.

Steve's laughter boomed in the night. Roberta would have denied being even plump. "She threw me over," he said, "and I never was so glad of anything in my life. What do you say?"

"I say no," she said flatly. "Your uncle made it plain why you could never marry me."

"To hell with him."

"He's right," she said bitterly. "I know what I am. I'll never marry you."

He knew that there was no use to plead or argue. She really meant what she said, and something like despair crept over him.

INA REMEMBERED suddenly what Bell had told her about a stampede. It didn't take Steve long to grasp the significance of it.

"It is a trap!" he exclaimed. "Our boys will try to stop that stampede and run flush into an ambush. They'll claim we were trying to stampede their cattle again. I didn't think even Bell would fight that dirty. Can you find your way back to town?"

"Of course."

"Then you hustle back there and tell Sheriff Neeley everything that's happened. Tell the whole truth, mind you. I've got to try to stop that stampede."

He put out the lantern and helped Ina onto her horse. He was almost as much worried about her as about the threatened crew. She was still under a shock, and he couldn't guess what she might do after she had reported Bell's death and confessed about her father.

"Don't worry about a thing," he begged. "The sheriff is your friend, and my uncle will stand back of you, even if he is a confounded old busybody."

She rode away without speaking.

Steve wasn't more than halfway to the camp over which he no longer was boss when he saw a blaze in the darkness that had to be near the Cassidy camp. It was undoubtedly the signal that would start the stampede.

It was nearing dawn when he reached camp and routed the crew. "Steve! What the devil's up?" Shorty Grant queried as he reached for his pants.

"Get your guns and plenty of ammunition," he replied, and told them all that Ina had been able to tell him while they dressed and got their horses.

They were a mile from camp, directly above most of their own cattle when they heard the frenzied bawling of maddened cattle coming down a draw. The animals just below began to stir and bawl uneasily as they sensed menace in the air.

And then they saw it—a bunch of crazy steers that seemed to be waving fiery torches above their backs. Every steer's tail was on fire, and the animals were fleeing in blind panic and agony from something they couldn't escape.

"Kill them!" Steve yelled. "Don't let 'em mix with the others." The stampedes he and his men had started would be nothing compared to this if they mixed with the main herd.

He himself shot the first steer. He fired at its white face and saw it tumble end over end. Then he had to spur desperately to keep from being run down. He ran with them now, firing as nearly as he could at the hearts or necks of the suffering beasts.

He could hear the guns of his friends, but as fast as he downed a leader another would be there to take its place. Accurate shooting was impossible, and sometimes they had to empty a gun to bring down a steer.

Soon he became aware that Shorty Grant and Mac Glade were beside him, with the others close at hand. There were only half a dozen steers left alive, but the cattle below them had taken alarm and were on the run.

Five minutes later the last of the living bovine torches had been extinguished. It was coming light, and they could see running cattle below them.

"They're in small bunches yet," Steve said. "If they don't get together they may stop, now that the shooting is over. But if they bunch up in Cayuse Cut—

"Two to one that's where Bell's men are laying for us," Shorty said.

Steve turned to the youngest rider of the outfit, a kid named Wes Crandall. He said, "Wes, ride back and make sure every one of those animals is out of their misery. The rest of you come with me."

THEY RODE down a draw, then up over a ridge above Cayuse Cut. They saw then that the incipient stampede was petering out.

"Look!" Shorty exclaimed. "Over there in them trees. Saddled horses."

"There must be another bunch on this side," Steve said. Had his men followed the stampede through there it was doubtful if any of them would have come out alive.

They had holstered their sixguns now, and carried rifles in their hands. Steve said, "I'm going to shoot a horse. The rest of you watch for men. If you see any, let 'em have it."

It was long range, but a horse dropped at his first shot, and the others began to dance wildly. "There they are!" Shorty yelled, and half a dozen rifles began to bark.

A couple of men shot back, but they hadn't anticipated an attack from the ridge and they had little stomach for such a fight. Most of them were intent only upon securing their horses before the animals were all shot down. They scrambled into their saddles and headed out of the cut.

Steve had been watching for Bob Ord.

Suddenly he saw him, drew a bead, and the gunman tumbled from his saddle.

Two horses had been brought down by the markmanship of Shorty Grant and Mac Glade. One man was pinned underneath; the other limped as he tried to run, vainly waving for his fellows to come and get him.

The men on the near side of the cut had undoubtedly fled with the others, although they couldn't be seen. The ambush they planned turned into their own rout.

When Steve and his men got into the cut they found Hub Wilson pinned beneath his dead horse, and they quickly flushed Guy Trotter out of the brush. They had brought down the three men the Diamond F wanted to get. Wilson and Trotter were white-faced from fear.

"Your boss was fool enough to tell Ina Buckle what you birds were up to, and she told me," Steve confided. "Bell, by the way, is dead."

It took the starch out of them. They knew Tim Bell, but their real employer, Hy Cassidy, was an unknown quantity. Convinced that Steve already knew all there was to know, they readily admitted that Bell and Cassidy had plotted murder.

"Come on, boys," Steve said, "we're taking these birds to town."

SHERIFF NEELEY wasn't long back from bringing in Tim Bell's body when Steve and his men reached town. Wilson and Trotter were forced to repeat their confessions before Cassidy or his lawyer had a chance to get to them.

"All right, Steve," the sheriff said. "I believe your story except for one thing. You didn't kill Bell. The Buckle girl has already admitted that she did it."

"But she didn't," Steve roared. "I killed him—or rather he killed himself with his own knife."

"No use, Steve. That girl's a wildcat. But don't worry, we'll turn her loose just as soon as we can arrange a hearing."

"You mean you've got her locked up?"

"Of course."

"I want to see her. Right now."

"Sure, it won't do any harm. Take him back there, Matt."

Steve expected to find Ina utterly despondent, or in tears. Instead she seemed perfectly happy, almost radiant.

"Look, Ina," he said, "there's no use for you to try to shield me. Even if I killed him, it was in self-defense, and they won't try to do anything about it."

"I tried to kill him," she said.

"Never mind that. Thanks to you it's all over. Bell and Ord are dead, and Hy Cassidy is completely licked. And I'm going to have you out of here if I have to tear down their blooming jail."

"I'm awfully glad they put me in here," she told him.

"What the dickens do you mean, you're glad? If you think your crazy story that you killed Bell will stand up—"

"I didn't mean that. If I hadn't been here when they turned Lem loose I might never have found out I wasn't a Buckle."

Open-mouthed, Steve said nothing.

"I'm not a Buckle," she repeated, as if the words themselves gave her pleasure. "When Lem went by my cell he stopped to tell me that now Pap is dead I won't inherit a cent from that fool grant. You see, the woman I thought was my mother was really my aunt. She adopted me when her sister, my mother, died.

"They just never told me," Ina explained, "but Lem says Pap told him just a few days ago, and said Pap had papers to prove it."

"No wonder you looked happy," Steve grinned. "But it doesn't make any difference. I want to marry you."

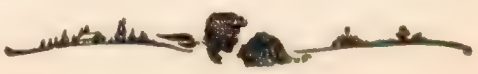
"I wouldn't have let you."

"But you will now."

"I—I—can't. I'm still just what your uncle said I was, ignorant and—"

"Now look here, Ina," Steve said sternly, "I won't stand for any foolishness from you, or from Uncle Bill either. I love you. Now come here."

She came as close as she could get, and he kissed her between the bars. "Won't it be something?" he said. "We can tell our kids that we got engaged in jail."



He had the worker's condescension for the drone

A Man of Feeling

By John McGreevy

THE BIG ROAN gentled to a stop, head cocked into the early morning breeze, nostrils aquiver with the excitement of the long canter down the slope.

Win Kessler laughed out loud and stroked the massive head. "Still reading my mind, aren't you?" It pleased him that after the long months of their separation the roan should remember. This was the resting point—the rise where Win liked to pause and look out across his holdings toward Oak Creek in the far distance.

Sunlight was sharpening the colors in

GEORGE'S LOGICAL MIND made no allowance for a foolish old cow like Allie. And that's where George was wrong

the canyon, and a brisk wind was chasing away the dawn haze. Win sighed with satisfaction and again touched the roan affectionately. It was good to be back, to feel the big horse under him, to breathe deeply of the crisp, sharp air. Only here, close to his land and to the people he'd known all his life, could he relax, be himself.

The weeks he'd lain in the Phoenix hospital under the critical eye of the surgeon, Win had fought a recurring fear that he had, in fact, died. The man in the antiseptic and ridiculous night-shirt, meekly following doctor's orders, was a stranger. One night he had slipped from his bed and checked the name on his chart, just to reassure himself.

But now, a little breathless from the unaccustomed exhilaration of the pre-breakfast ride, Win felt his old self-assurance. This was his world—the K Bar, peopled by men and animals he knew.

He thought of Jan and felt a tremor of uncertainty. She would have missed him by now and be worried. She had worried too much in the past year. There were encroaching lines around her soft blue eyes, and gray had routed all the auburn from her hair.

A nudge set Ty in motion, back toward the ranch.

Jan didn't understand that a ride like this before breakfast was the best tonic he could have. They'd been together almost twenty-five years, but to her the ranch was still just a place to live. She accepted his devotion to the K Bar, but she didn't understand it. To her, his riding Ty would seem a piece of dangerous foolishnes, risking all that had been gained by the long weeks of slow convalescence.

Win shook his head slowly. Maybe Jan was right. The doctor thought so, and George thought so.

Immediately, Win was angry with himself for the resentment he felt toward George Pletcher. Jan's nephew saw things in a different way. But George was in his mid-twenties, a college man; why expect him to think like a fifty-year-old cowman who'd been schooled aboard a pony? It wasn't fair.

Win slowed Ty a little. He didn't want to reach the ranch house until he'd had a chance to think this through. Jan and George would be having breakfast, and he wanted to be able to give them an easy greeting.

Being honest with himself, Win knew that his feeling about George Pletcher came from having expected too much. If only he and Jan had been able to have a son of their own!

Ty lurched skittishly as Win involuntarily pressured the big roan's sides.

"Sorry, Ty," Win apologized, and the animal slipped back into his easy, rolling gait.

Off in a side-pocket, he noticed Mike Hayes moving through a small cluster of cattle. Old Mike—just as conscientious as when he'd first come to the K Bar, thirty years before. He supposed Mike would be insulted if he spoke of a pension.

In another minute or so, Win would be sighting the ranch house, and he still hadn't thought through his problem.

JAN AND THE DOCTOR thought he should retire—spend the winters playing golf and loafing in the Phoenix sunshine, the summers fishing and boating on the coast. Win had resisted their plans, contending that he couldn't leave the K Bar without a master. So Jan had sent for George Pletcher. George hadn't settled into a permanent job, and he was the only child of Jan's dead sister. What could be more natural than that the childless Kesslers and their nephew should get together at this time? They needed George. He needed them.

But, stubbornly and unreasonably, Win still resisted retirement.

George was capable, thorough, and energetic, and Jan had been most impressed with his handling of affairs while Win had been in the hospital. He was, she said, a born manager.

Still, Win and George didn't think alike, didn't feel alike.

A racket closely resembling an amateur trombonist at practice shattered Win's reverie. Again and again the frantic soul-

ful bellow echoed across the morning landscape.

"Allie," Win shouted, and pulled the roan to a stop. With a wide grin, he slipped from the saddle and walked quickly from the trail to the fence line.

Shambling toward him, still bellowing her discordant welcome, was an old, fat milk-cow. Each lumbering step was an adventure, and it seemed she was going to fall before she reached the fence. But she made it.

Win wrenched up a clump of new grass and held it out to the cow. "How're they treating you, Allie?" he asked as the ancient, yellow teeth began chomping the tidbit. "You been running things for me while I been gone?"

Almost as if she understood and wanted to reassure him, Allie raised her head and bellowed her answer.

Win laughed, threw her another bunch of grass, and went back to Ty.

The old cow stayed by the fence watching him, lowing her appreciation until he made the turn into the ranch house. . . . .

The house itself was unpretentious. Walking up to it, after turning Ty over to one of the hands, Win took pleasure in its simple lines. This was a house that was part of the landscape. It belonged.

Win and his father had started building it more than thirty years ago. Win's dad had been a great believer in using the natural materials at hand: timber from back in the mountains, rock from below the red cliff-face. They had built well, Win and his dad. The house had aged gracefully, becoming more and more a part of the land.

Of course, there had been additions. As the ranch prospered, Win tried to ease Jan's work. Now there was running water, inside plumbing, electricity. But, essentially, the house was unchanged.

Jan and George were at the big table in the kitchen when Win entered. As he saw the look of concern in Jan's eyes, Win made his decision. He could not allow her to continue worrying.

"You were out early," she said, rising.

He nodded and moved to the sink to wash his hands. "Haven't had a good ride on Ty in a long while."

Jan had gone to the stove. "I hope you didn't overdo it."

Win smiled in a way that he hoped was reassuring. "I let Ty do the work." He soaped his big hands. "Place looks fine. We've had more water than usual this winter."

"Should save us quite a bit on feed." That was the first time George had spoken.

Win dried his hands and stepped to the table. "Guess it will."

WIN LOOKED DOWN at the younger man and found himself wondering if George looked like his father. George had a tight, reserved face. Even the smile was somehow wary. Behind the eyes, feelings were carefully hidden.

Win sat at the head of the table. He stared down at his empty plate. "As a matter of fact," he said, "I took my morning ride to do some thinking."

George watched him with polite interest. Jan turned from the stove, where eggs were sputtering in bacon grease.

Win was annoyed with the slight tremor in his voice. No reason to be excited. What he was about to say was the logical thing, the practical thing. "I've owed you two an answer ever since I got home from the hospital."

He wished George would say something, but there was no sound from him or Jan.

He put his hands flat on the table-top as if to steady himself. "I've come to the conclusion," he said, "that you and the doctor know best."

There was a quick little movement from Jan, and in a moment she had thrown her arms around his neck and was holding him tightly. "Oh, Win," she whispered. "I'm so glad."

Clumsily, he patted her hand. "Who knows—maybe I can get to be a really good golfer."

She gave his arm an affectionate squeeze and went quickly back to the stove, hiding tear-filled eyes.

"I'd have taken longer to make up my

mind," he went on, "if I wasn't so sure the ranch will be in good hands." He looked across the table at George.

The thin lips pressed tightly together in what must have been a smile of gratitude. "I don't think you'll regret this, Uncle Win."

The voice was as carefully controlled as the smile.

If the boy would just relax—even for a second.

Jan was chattering as she served him. "You've earned a rest. You've put too much of yourself into this place. It's time you stopped living for the ranch and started thinking of yourself." Again, her hand rested on his arm.

He nodded absently. He wished she'd stop talking about it.

The decision was made and he'd done what she wanted.

George pushed back from the table. "If you have time after breakfast, Uncle Win, and feel up to it, I'd like to go over the books with you."

"Sure." He watched the younger man walk to the door. He had to stop thinking of him as "Jan's nephew."

George hesitated. "When did you want me to take over?"

Win concentrated on his food. "Right away." He had to look at the boy. "You're the boss, as of this minute. It's on your shoulders."

Satisfied, George nodded and went out.

Over his third cup of black coffee, while Jan planned endlessly for the months ahead, Win had a sudden sharp stab of remorse.

Was this what it had all been for? To work your life away on a ranch and then turn it over to your wife's nephew? He sipped the scalding coffee.

As if she had read his mind, Jan leaned closer. "Win," she said softly, "you're sure?"

He smiled. "It's the only sensible thing to do."

She sighed happily. "After all," she said, "you've had the good part. You made the ranch what it is. No one can take that away."

FOR TWENTY-FIVE YEARS, she had always known the right thing to say. He stood up, bent over, and kissed her lightly. Loving Jan, like working the ranch, was one of the good things in his life.

"I better go check those books with George," he said. "After all, he's the boss."

JAN

She laughed, and the tension of the past weeks was gone. That laughter alone was enough to tell him he had been right.

The little room that Win had used as a storeroom for his guns and fishing-gear, George had turned into an office. Gray filing cabinets lined the walls, and an adding machine and typewriter dominated the desk. A frightening battery of ledgers stood stiffly at attention between heavy bookends, and stacks of market reports, underlined in red, blue and green pencil marks lay under paper weights.

George sat in a straight-backed chair at the desk. He was adding a column of figures when Win stepped in, and the pen seemed a natural extension of his body. He scarcely looked up, but with an impatient little nod of his head gestured Win into the only other chair.

Win obediently moved to the chair, annoyed with himself for tiptoeing. As he sat watching the pen set more figures into a long column, he was depressed by the atmosphere of the room. It reminded him of a banker's office he had visited as a young man. Weather had been against him; beef prices were down; he was in danger of losing the K Bar; he'd been forced to go to the bank and ask for an extension of the loan he'd made.

He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. Funny he should be reminded of that now—something that happened twenty years before. There was no similarity in the two situations. At the bank, he had been a penniless rancher, come to ask a favor. Here, he was the successful ranch owner, talking with his new foreman.

"I think you're in for a pleasant surprise, Uncle Win." George had put down the pen and was facing him.

"As long as we're to be partners, why don't we drop the uncle? Make it just Win?"

George gave him the tight little smile and an almost imperceptible shrug. "Whatever you say." He pulled one of the heavy ledgers out of its place. "While you were in the hospital, I tried to do a little organizing." He looked again toward Win. "The books were on a rather haphazard basis."

"I usually took 'em into Harley Beamis couple of times a year. Harley's a C.P.A. He used to put 'em in shape for me. I suppose they were out of line when you found 'em." Even as he made the explanation, he was surprised by its apologetic tone.

George had been flipping the ledger pages. "From now on, we'll know exactly where we stand at all times." He held the heavy book out to Win. "As you'll see, I've taken the liberty of cutting a few corners."

Win stared down at the rows of neat figures. Even if he concentrated on them and on what George was saying, he got no clear picture. This wasn't the K Bar. The K Bar was what he had seen and felt on the morning ride.

"This looks fine," he said.

George took the ledger and returned it to its place. He chose another. "I think," he said, "that sometimes we can get too close to a business operation. We lose our objectivity." The voice was as precise as the rows of figures. "Someone coming in fresh can see waste." Again, he offered the ledger to Win. "The new broom, you know."

Win wanted to tell him to keep the ledger, that it meant nothing, but he dutifully accepted it. "Accounts receivable," he read, and grinned at George. "This should be the best reading."

THERE was no smile in return. Instead, George cleared his throat and looked away. "In the past," he said, "you haven't always collected."

Win closed the ledger. "We've done all right," he answered, wondering if he would always be on the defensive with the boy.

George took the ledger. "For instance," he went on, "I noticed that a personal note signed by Odd Carruthers is almost three months overdue."

"Odd's good for it. He's been having a bad time." He'd forgotten about the loan.

The ledger was slipped back into its place. "I wrote him a letter asking for immediate payment."

For a second, Win couldn't move. He stared at the younger man. "You what?" he asked.

George faced him squarely. "I wrote asking for payment."

Win stood. His big hands clenched convulsively. "You had no right to do that," he said. "That note didn't mean a thing. Odd himself insisted on me taking it." He moved to the desk. "He can pay back that money whenever he has it."

"I was only acting in your best interests." George got slowly to his feet, facing his uncle. "It's a substantial sum, long overdue."

Win turned away toward the door. "But Odd's a friend of mine. We've been ranching side by side since we was kids."

"If I'm going to be responsible for the ranch—" the voice was calm, unruffled—"I must run it in a businesslike way. Not on sentiment."

"We don't start bein' businesslike with Odd," Win snapped, and went quickly out. . . .

He got his jacket and hat without disturbing Jan and slipped out of the house. He had to go over to the Carruthers' place,

explain to Odd just what had happened.

Ignoring the sleek Olds sedan, he climbed into the old pickup truck and roared and backfired his way down the drive. Next to Ty, this truck was his favorite transportation. Its rugged discomfort suited him better than the cushioned ease of the passenger car.

He remembered when he had bought the truck—just before things had begun to break well for them. He and Jan had debated a long while before making the decision. He had treated the truck like a baby. Now, it was only one of several, and the poorest of the lot. No one liked to drive it but him.

Things are changing, he thought, and I won't change with them. The surest sign of old age—clinging to the past, pretending things were better then.

He swung onto the highway and headed for the Carruthers' ranch. He hadn't seen much of Odd in late years. Somehow, as things had gone better for the K Bar, bad luck seemed to settle at Odd.

A wry grin stretched Win's face. At breakfast, he had turned the place over to George; and, an hour later, he was driving hell-for-leather to countermand an action the boy had taken.

He slowed down. Either George was going to run things, or Win was; they couldn't both do it. It wasn't fair to the boy to put him in charge and then begin interfering.

He pulled into a side road, swung the truck around and headed back toward the K Bar.

He'd made his decision. He'd have to stick by it.

Later, when he was down by the corral, he saw George. "About Odd Carruthers's note," he said.

The boys's face was set. "Yes?"

He certainly didn't make it easy. Win held onto the rough wood of the corral fence.

"I decided you were right. It's your show. Run it your way."

George nodded. He didn't say anything. He didn't have to.

He'd made his point.

FOR THE REST of that day and during the long evening, Win worked hard at sharing Jan's enthusiasm for the future. They'd loaf in Phoenix until the heat drove them out. Then they could go to Santa Barbara or on up the coast to Carmel. If they got restless, they could take a lengthy fishing trip in Mazatlan, as they'd long wanted to.

He grinned and agreed and tried to picture this life that was to be theirs. There was no retreating now. George and the formidable array of ledgers stood between him and retreat. . . .

The next morning, he forced himself to stay in bed long after he had awakened. He lay in the darkened room listening to the far-off, familiar racket of the ranch. Each sound conjured up a picture: the frightened bellowing of cattle being herded into a pick-up; the shouts of the hands—old Mike's voice shrill above the others; and finally, the roar and rattle of the truck bouncing down the road.

These familiar sounds made up the world he had known all his life. But now he was outside that world, cut off from it by his retirement.

He and Jan had a leisurely breakfast. George was already busy in the little office. This was the new hub of the K Bar. The calm, precise voice issued orders. The pen made new and significant entries in the ledgers.

After breakfast, Jan turned to her packing, and Win, feeling uncomfortably in the way, wandered outside.

Small white clouds spotted the spring sky. Birds, in from winter vacations to the south, were cutting up a ruckus in the cottonwoods. And down near the corral he thought he heard Ty nickering excitedly just from the sheer wonder of spring.

Win leaned against the rough timber on the porch and listened. He was so lost in reverie that he didn't realize old Mike Hayes was standing beside him until he heard the artificial clearing of the throat Mike used to preface a conversation.

"Hi, Mike," he said with a self-conscious grin. "Caught me spring-dreaming."

Mike nodded. "Looked to be far gone."

There was a little pause. "Understand you're soon leaving for good."

"Seems to be the best thing," Win said, avoiding the old man's eyes. Again he wondered why he felt on the defensive. "Jan and the doctors think I should retire."

Mike waited for so long to speak, Win thought that the conversation must be over. Then Mike gave a sigh. "Figure it's time I quit, too," he said.

"Not just because I'm retiring," Win protested. "You know there'll always be a berth on the K Bar for you, Mike."

Aged, crooked fingers toyed with a short length of rope. "Things look to be different from here on in." He laughed brokenly. "Too late for me to change—even if I wanted to. You can take this to be my notice."

"If that's the way you want it," Win answered. "I sort of counted on you to keep things in line for me." He looked at the old face for the hint of a grin. There was none.

Mike started off. "Such as me ain't needed here no more," he muttered, and hobbled out into the brightening sunshine.

Win thought of following the old man, but found the prospect of continuing the conversation disquieting. Instead, he stood for a little longer on the porch, then sauntered down to the stables, saddled Ty and headed out toward the east meadow.

THE ROAN was so pleased to be setting out into the day's brightness that he was as skittish as a colt. Absorbing something of the animal's spirit, Win lost the sense of depression he had taken from Mike's announcement.

It wasn't until they had gone almost the full length of the east meadow that Win isolated the nagging sense of something wrong. Old Allie, the fat, foolish cow, was missing. She had not bellowed her off-key welcome to him, had not come lumbering to the fence to beg for a token.

They might have taken her in to the barn, though it didn't seem likely. Or she might have mixed in with the herd they were driving to the upper pasture, but that wasn't probable either.

He dismounted and clambered through the pasture fence, feeling a little foolish as he called the old cow's name. She didn't come, and his search, thorough and somehow desperate, showed him she was not in the east meadow.

Not quite understanding the growing apprehension he felt, Win headed Ty back to the ranch house. There must be some perfectly simple explanation for Allie's disappearance. She was so old and irresponsible.

He turned Ty over to one of the hands and started toward the house. He met George halfway.

"Been out for a constitutional?" In the younger man's manner was the condescension of the worker to the drone.

Win nodded. "Been up by the east meadow. I couldn't seem to locate Allie."

"Allie?"

"You know—the loud-mouthed old milk-cow that stays in that pasture." He grinned to hide his concern. "She was there yesterday. I saw her."

George smiled. "Oh, yes. We sold her."

"Sold Allie?" Win was only half listening to the careful words, the businesslike reasoning. Rage pounded in him.

"Seems like a small thing," George was saying, "but it's small economies that add up to big profits. That old cow was useless, always in the way, eating feed that should be going to our good beef animals."

The two men stood very close. Win fought his arms down to his sides. "I want that cow back."

George looked at him in disbelief. "You're joking!"

Win could no longer keep his hands under control. He grabbed a fistful of the leather jacket before him. "Mister," he said, "you get that cow back or don't come back yourself."

With deliberate insolence, George broke the hold on his jacket. Tight-lipped, he stepped away from Win. "I thought we had agreed to run the ranch my way," he said.

"You going after that cow?"

"I most certainly am not. The cow was sold this morning to Whitcomb. I imagine she's in the slaughter-pens at Phoenix by now." George turned and walked quickly toward the house.

Win stood for a moment looking after the stiff, arrogant back, and then, acting almost on reflex, he spun around and raced toward the garage.

The keys were in the ancient pickup.

"Oh, boy! A Western!"

He slammed the door and in a cloud of dust and exhaust fumes, careened into the drive, past the house and out toward the highway and Phoenix.

AS WIN got farther from the ranch and closer to the city, his rage subsided and he began to see his search for Allie in the cold and depressing light of objectivity.

Here again, he was interfering. George saw nothing but a liability in the old cow. His action in selling her to be slaughtered *was* businesslike.

At Whitcomb's, they remembered the worthless old carcass. They had accepted her only because they bought the fine beef the K Bar ordinarily offered. But they couldn't market her. They had sold her, practically given her to Loeffler—a butcher who specialized in inferior meats.

Driving across town in the rattling pickup, fighting traffic, sweating out the interminable delays at stop lights, Win realized the absurdity of his search. Here he was a middle-aged man, a successful rancher, desperately trying to save a worthless old cow from slaughter.

Dusk had settled over the section of the city where Loeffler had his butchering headquarters. Employees and passers-by looked at Win in surprise as he brought the truck to a grinding stop and leaped out of the cab.

There was about the place the stench of the slaughterhouse; the thick odor of fresh blood.

But long before Win reached the dirty pens, he knew he was not too late. Allie's soulful, off-key bellow was music to him. The disreputable old cow came lunging to the fence, eyes rolling, ragged tail switching. She had known he would come to save her. . . .

After he loaded Allie into the pickup, Win phoned Jan at the ranch to reassure her. She tried to laugh with him over his escapade, but he could tell she had been crying.

He drove slowly from Phoenix to the K Bar. He had a great deal to think about. Only an occasional melodious bellow from Allie interrupted his train of thought.

Old Mike was waiting for him when he pulled in. They stood for a second in the yellow glare of the pickup's lights, grinning at each other. Then, Win found himself shaking Mike's wrinkled hand.

"Take care of Allie," he said. "She's been through a terrible experience. Probably ought to have double rations for a day or two."

He left Mike and the cow talking to each other and strode toward the house.

Jan met him at the door, and for a long moment, what he had to say was forgotten as he held her in his arms. She looked up at him, and he saw her eyes were red-rimmed.

"I was so worried," she said.

He closed the door and moved into the room. "I'm sorry about that. I should have told you, but at the time I didn't think of it."

She stood uncertainly near the door. "George is gone. He left right after you did. He's going to Albuquerque." She came to him. "You can get in touch with him there—if you want to."

He gestured to a chair. "Would you sit down a minute, honey?"

She stared at him a second, and then quietly obeyed.

He paced away from her, marshalling his thoughts. "You probably thought I'd lost my mind," he began, "racing off after that foolish old cow." He turned to face her and was relieved to see she was smiling.

"I guess I didn't admit to myself how I felt about this place until that happened to Allie." He found it easier to talk if he kept moving. "To me, honey, that cow isn't just a liability. Sure—she doesn't produce now; she eats feed that could go to the other cattle. But when I look at that old cow, I remember when her milk saved calves whose mothers had died or been killed. I remember when those calves that Allie saved kept us going." His voice broke. "Why, that worthless old carcass meant the difference between our failing or succeeding. How could I forget that now?"

He didn't want to look at Jan, because he knew she was crying. "Honey," he said, "to me this ranch isn't just a business proposition. I don't have a bookkeeper's mind. I've got feelings . . . feelings about the land, the cattle, the men I work with. Maybe George is right, and I'm wrong. But it's the way I am, and I'm afraid it's the way I got to be for as long as I'm around."

There was no sound in the room, and it seemed to him that all he had thought and felt during the long ride back from Phoenix had seemed somehow childish and incoherent when he put it into words. Jan couldn't understand.

A light touch on his arm turned him around. She was standing at his side, and she was smiling. "I'm glad," she said, and her voice was no more than a whisper.

"You're sure?"

She nodded. "I want what's best for you, Win. That's all I've ever wanted. Now, I know what that is."

She came into his arms again and he held her tight.

"Probably," he said, "you think your husband's as foolish as that old milk-cow."

She looked up at him and there was a light in her eyes that he had almost forgotten. "I'm proud," she whispered, "to be married to a man of feeling."

Next Issue—

A News Roundup of Western Movies by Robert Cummings

Featuring a review of Universal-International's

SASKATCHEWAN

With ALAN LADD and SHELLEY WINTERS

•

PLUS a word-and-picture personality sketch of

BURT LANCASTER

RANCH FLICKER TALK

a fact story

He is the most cunning of all forest denizens

Fun-Loving Fox

By Ben B. Sampselle

THE RED FOX, generally considered the most crafty and cunning of the fox clan, is distributed in a dozen or more species from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from the Arctic wastes to as far south as the Southern states. No other creature of the forest has so much cunning and resourcefulness, speed and endurance, packed into his frame as this sly, brush-tailed fellow. His craftiness attracted the attention of Aesop, and ever since then the Red Fox has lived up to his reputation as sleight-of-foot man of the animal kingdom.

Trappers in buckskin have endeavored to lay him by his agile heels since colonial days, while scarlet-coated ladies and gentlemen, mounted on superb hunters, have chased him for his pelt, and for the doubtful sport. But there is often as much sport for the crafty Mr. Fox as for the scarlet-coated ladies and gentlemen. While the fox-hound's "smeller" is one of *par excellence,* his eyesight isn't 20/20 by any means, and the shrewd, fun-loving fox is likely to double-back several times on his trail for a sight of the hounds, a half-mile or more behind him.

An early share-cropper whose cabin was on the fringe of a large colonial estate laughed with Mr. Fox at the aristocratic ladies and gentlemen as he viewed their antics in "riding to the hounds." Mr. Fox stayed a whoop and a holler ahead of the baying hounds, loping along and throwing an occasional glance over his shoulder. The share-cropper, from his vantage point on a hillock, saw the hounds pick up the fox's scent and take off, baying.

A half-hour later, with the hounds bay-

ing way to hell-an'-gone in the distance, the fox circled back, running over a plowed field, through a patch of woods, across another plowed field, then doubled back. In the first plowed field was a tall persimmon tree which the fall winds had almost leveled. The fox "tapped" the tree, which consisted of running along the trunk, out upon a long branch, then leaping back upon his old trail and taking off for the woods. The amused share-cropper watched the befuddled hounds and the scarlet-coated gentry mill around for a half-hour, then give up to ride another day.

Mr. Fox has to be clever to fool a good fox-hound. The hound won't be fooled by the fox crossing the trail of another fox. Also, the hound always knows, "He went that'a'way." He never starts in the wrong direction when he picks up the scent.

The Sierra Nevada Red Fox, one of the more than a dozen species spread across the country, is typical of his tribe. He stands about one foot high at the shoulders, is thirty-six to forty inches in length, counting his brushy tail which makes up a little less than one-third of his length. The average weight of an adult male is eleven pounds, and that of the female nine pounds.

The general color of the body is a rich, rusty red, while the surfaces of legs and back are usually black, and the tail a mixed black and buff, tipped with white. However, the Red Fox frequently steps across the line when choosing a mate, as is shown by the color mixtures taken by trappers of a half-century or more ago. More than half the number of foxes taken in one locality were crosses, while in other localities the percentage of crosses ran as high as eighty percent.

The Cross Fox and the Black or Silver Gray Fox are merely color phases of the Red Fox. The Black Fox is also termed Silver Gray or Silver Fox, on account of the bright silver luster of its fur.

SELECT pelts of the Red Fox, commonly called "silver," were the most valuable produced in the West in total value during Mr. Fox's heyday, with the possible exception of sea otter skins. However, singly, the pelt of the Black Fox was more valuable on the fur market. But, in later years, due to the successful dyeing of inferior pelts to imitate the Black Fox, the value of the genuine pelts declined until they sold for less than the better grade of Silver Fox pelts. Also, the successful operation of fox farms helped lower the prices.

Like other fur-bearing animals, the fox that lived in the colder areas and in heavy timber carried a more valuable pelt on his back. The fur was denser, softer, and less faded than that of the members of the tribe which lived in the brighter sunlit areas. His tail was more brushy, too, which he used to advantage. When he went to sleep in bitterly cold weather he bunched his feet and nose together and curled his tail around these unprotected parts of his body.

The Red Fox has a strong taste for the snowshoe rabbit which attains a weight of six to eight pounds. He takes advantage of the rabbit when chasing him over the snow, making the rabbit break trail for him, and at every bound lands exactly in the footprints made by the hare. If the snow is loose and deep the rabbit doesn't stand much of a chance, but if the footing is firm the Red Fox will more than likely go hungry, unless the snowshoe rabbit is caught flat-footed at the start.

The Red Fox is not above feeding on carrion when other food is scarce. In winter, at high altitudes, he catches birds when able—the hairy woodpecker, the nutcracker, sapsucker, and mountain chickadee. On the more filling side are squirrels, mice, conies, bushy-tailed trade rats, weasels, and rabbits. During summer, chipmunks and squirrels are plentiful in the meadow at timberline, and the Red Fox dines bountifully.

A Forty-niner prospecting for gold in the motherlode country, told of seeing a chipmunk cheat a Red Fox out of his breakfast one morning. The miner leaned on his pick as he rested beside a thicket of buckbrush. He heard a commotion in the brush, and presently a chipmunk dashed out, closely pursued by a Red Fox. The striped fellow hightailed it for a boulder

some forty or fifty feet distant. He didn't take the shortest route to the big rock—a straight line, but zig-zagged sharply as he skittered across the open ground.

This series of zigs and zags worked only a slight handicap on the fox, as the sly fellow also knew something about changing courses swiftly, using his brushy tail like an airplane rudder. But the handicap was sufficient for the chipmunk to reach a small burrow under the boulder a scant half-foot ahead of the fox's sharp teeth, which clicked together ominously behind the chipmunk.

THE FOX did not attempt to dig the chipmunk from the burrow, but stood around alertly, expectantly, for a few minutes. When the chipmunk did not so much as poke his nose out, the fox trotted off.

The Red Fox also preys on meadow mice. He hunts them by walking along stiff-legged; then suddenly springs ahead to the nest of the mice and starts digging furiously. The nests are usually only a few inches below the surface of the ground, and the mice are easily taken.

Unlike his eastern cousin, the Red Fox of the West is seldom found in well-settled country. He lives in the vicinity of lofty timbered peaks, but during winter often comes down to altitudes around 5000 feet. He commonly forages over a territory some five miles in diameter, but in winter he runs farther afield, covering a range of nearly a dozen miles in diameter.

On his foraging rounds the Red Fox travels an upwind course, scanning every thicket that might hold food, or an enemy. He stops and stiffens at the slightest noise. He trots along for hours at a time, in a zig-zag course, but always upwind. He makes little excursions to the side, but always comes back to his course.

While looked upon by many as a carnivorous villain, devoting his time and energy to robbing hen houses, the fox is more likely to look for his food among mice, rabbits, squirrels, and grasshoppers. Poultry enclosures, however, should be fox-tight. An early settler in the West constructed a yard for his dozen chickens by cutting saplings, sharpening one end of each, and driving them deeply into the ground. One night, upon hearing a commotion in the pen, he went out with his rifle to investigate. In the moonlight he saw two Red Foxes squirm out through a hole they had tunneled beneath the saplings. A half-dozen of the settler's fowls lay dead in the pen.

But the fox's foraging isn't all mischief, and his destruction of troublesome rodents and insects seems to more than balance the ledger in his favor.

FOXES, like other members of the dog family, will bury excess food. A Montana rancher told the author of watching a Red Fox dig up a cache of food at a time when snow covered the ground to more than a foot in depth.

Where there is cover, the Red Fox's gait is a slow trot, but on open ground he breaks into a long lope that takes him where he wants to go at a rapid pace. The best speed of the sly fellow is between twenty-five and thirty miles an hour—a little faster than his cousin, the coyote, but slower than the jack rabbit running under a full head of steam.

The Red Fox of the West usually selects a natural cavity in the rock slides or talus slopes for his home, and seldom digs a den in solid ground. He prefers southern or eastern exposure. This preference is practical because the rodents upon which he feeds are more plentiful in such exposures, particularly in winter. The den serves mainly as a nursery, and is used infrequently at other times. Its furnishings are spartan—only a little dry grass is used for lining the principal chamber.

The Red Fox does not hibernate, but remains active all winter. In fact, he sleeps less in winter than summer. As a rule, he has no set schedule for sleeping. When tired he will take his nap in the winter sunshine—on the top of a boulder, a log, or rise of ground. This frequently made Mr. Fox easy prey for the golden eagle in the days when the furry tribe was more nu-

merous. Eagles hunted over the haunts of the Red Fox, especially in winter when other food was scarce, and the dark bodies of the foxes stood out plainly against the background of white snow. While Mr. Fox does not hibernate, he does remain in his den on extremely cold nights, waiting until noon of the next day before coming out.

Uusually the Red Fox does his courting in late February, if he is a Westerner. Snow-tracks will show that he has selected a mate and that they are traveling as a pair, while up to this time Mr. Fox has been going it alone. That he chooses a mate for the full season is agreed upon among naturalists and woodsmen, but whether this is for *life* is a disputed point. Whether he mates for life or not, Mr. Fox is a devoted husband and father. He brings food to Mrs. Fox while she is confined to the den, and takes a big part in the feeding and caring of the pups.

The pups, or kits, are born around the first of April, four to eight to a litter. While members of the canine family, at birth they are more kitten-like in appearance and do not open their eyes until the eighth or ninth day. They remain in the den with the mother-fox until three or four weeks old. When about three months of age, the pups are weaned and begin to eat solid food. In September they approach full growth, but stay with their parents until just before winter sets in, when they strike out on their own.

BRUCE Crofoot, a Montana oldtimer, told of witnessing a family of foxes foraging in summer. The father fox led the column, followed by four pups, with the mother fox bringing up the rear. The den was on a talus slope above a piece of mountain benchland covered with tall grass. The young foxes were given a lesson in catching meadow mice. At first the parents dug out the mice, flipped them toward the waiting pups with paw or teeth, and let the young ones scramble for them. But soon they had the pups themselves digging the mice out.

The Gray Fox, found in nearly every state from the Atlantic to the Pacific, should not be confused with the Silver Gray Fox. The Gray Fox is grayish-white in color, and the male and female are nearly the same size. They usually select a hollow log or tree for their den, except those living on or near the deserts. The Gray Fox is not such a prolific breeder as his cousin, the Red Fox.

The Gray Fox will readily take to a tree when pursued by hounds. He will also climb for his food, not being strictly a meat eater. He frequently has been seen climbing fruit trees, both in daytime and at night, and knocking the fruit down to the pups who remain on the ground. This group of the canine family consume great quantities of berries, when available—such as the coffee berry and the fruit from the manzanita, in the Southwest.

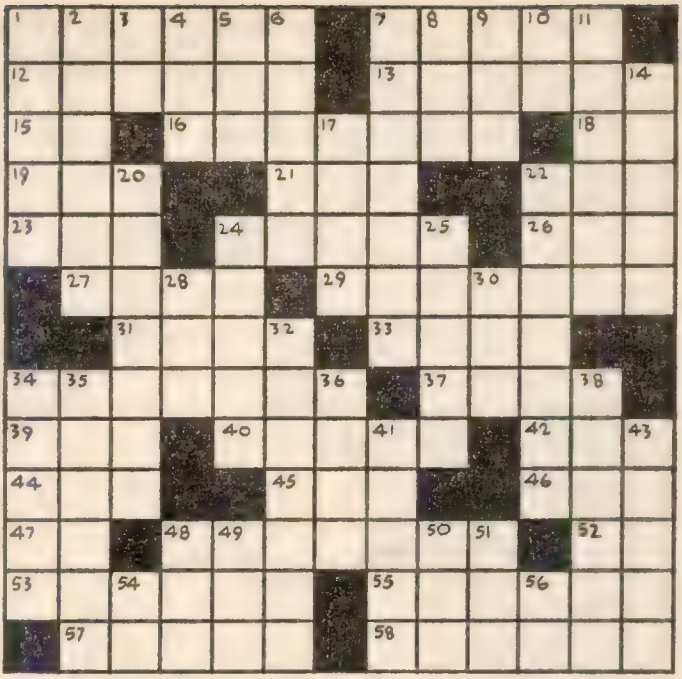
The Kit Fox, Swift Fox, or Burrowing Fox, as he is sometimes known, frequents the desert areas of the Southwest, where weather conditions are hot and arid. His pelt is of small value. The name Swift Fox comes from his great initial burst of speed, and that of the Burrowing Fox because he digs a den in the sandy soil of the desert.

OLDTIMERS say than an average hound dog can outrun a Kit Fox, except for his initial burst of speed, and yet a Kit Fox is seldom caught by dogs. When a dog thinks he is about to lay a fox by the heels, and opens his jaws to clamp down, the swift fox turns like a pinwheel and is off in another direction before the dog's teeth can click together. It takes the hound valuable seconds to get himself headed in the new direction.

The wolf, coyote, lynx, and eagle took a heavy toll of the fox tribe in years past. And trappers levied heavily on his hide.

Mr. Fox, however, is a long way from extinction. The habitat of the Red Fox is more often than not in regions that are remote, difficult of access, and subject to heavy snowfall, particularly in the West. This prevents great incursions of trappers to thin the ranks of the furry tribe. With his speed, cunning, and endurance, Mr. Fox is likely to be around for a long time, "to run another day."

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



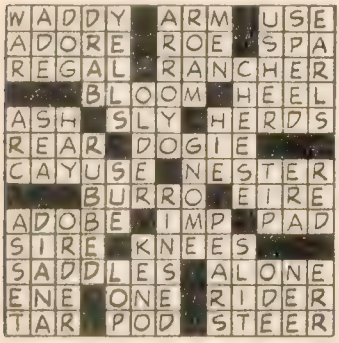
The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. Half-wild horse
7. Cowboy garment
12. To ransom
13. Wild West shows
15. Near
16. Tea-serving vessels
18. Concerning
19. Nathaniel's nickname
21. Possesses
22. Before (prefix)
23. To perish
24. Cowboy's rope
26. Guided
27. Back of the neck
29. Continued stories
31. Fortune teller
33. To mend, as socks
34. Saddle attachment
37. Indian's home
39. Large cask
40. Trap
42. Be mistaken
44. Unit of work
45. Had lunch
46. Instrumental duet
47. Sound of hesitation
48. Cowboy
52. Displaced person (abbr.)
53. Group of saddle horses
55. Optical phenomenon
57. Late
58. Fashions

DOWN

1. Owner's mark on cattle
2. To keep
3. Old Dutch (abbr.)
4. Twine fabric
5. Third letter
6. City in Nebraska
7. Intersected
8. Very warm
9. Paid notices
10. Protestant Episcopal (abbr.)
11. Reddish-brown horse
14. Fruit pits
17. Free ticket
20. Pestering
22. Schemed
24. Sinister looks
25. To harangue
28. For each
30. Anger
32. Horse out of control
34. Beef animal
35. Small tower
36. Footway
38. To walk wearily
41. Paper measures
43. Lariats
48. Mongrel
49. Peculiar
50. Insect egg
51. Thirsty
54. Pa's spouse
56. Albert's nickname



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

Daughter

THIS WAS OLIVER'S last campaign. He had to stir up the Army, and the Apaches, and a new man for Vella

THE SUDDEN scarlet incandescence which ignited the eastern rim of the desert marked the break of a day which Owen Oliver had dreaded and anticipated by turn during the eighteen bitter-sweet years of his widowhood.

This sunrise marked the anniversary of birth and death following each other in close succession under the canvas hood of a Conestoga which Oliver had been guiding westward to California.

of the Desert

by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

His wife had left in Oliver's keeping a precious reminder of their brief, happy years together: an hour-old daughter whom he had named Vella, for her mother. Rearing a girl-child had seemed an impossible responsibility for an overland scout with no kin to turn to. After the funeral, a dozen women in the train had wanted to adopt Vella, but from the first he had refused.

Well, now Vella had come of age. Today. Sergeant Owen Oliver's thoughts were dwelling on that when sunrise caught him halfway up the flinty path which led to his U. S. Army heliograph station perched on the crest of Signal Peak.

"She can't stay here," the old man muttered, "and she won't leave willingly. The army'd muster me out before it would transfer me back to civilization." He lifted his eyes skyward, uttering a prayer with the frank simplicity of a man to whom God was a very real source of help in trouble: "Dear Lord, this thing is beyond me. I leave it in Your hands."

Vella had been a year old when Owen Oliver, then in his forty-seventh year, had signed up for duty with the U. S. Army at Fort Destruction, as a civilian scout who knew the wilderness of Arizona Territory as thoroughly as he knew the palm of his own hand. At the time, it had been a means toward an end; he had hired the sutler's wife at the fort to mother his child.

Then had come the Indian troubles, and Oliver's knowledge of the Apache country had led to his official enlistment and training as a signal corpsman. The Army needed an experienced Arizona man to handle its key station in the Territory's wide-flung heliograph system here at Signal Peak, and regulations required him to give up his civilian status to take the job.

Except that this was Vella's eighteenth birthday, the day was dawning like any other here on Signal Peak. For more sunrises than he could remember—going on eight years now—Sergeant Oliver had plodded up to his heliograph rig, ready to relay any military message traffic being flashed across the Territory.

This day would be like any other. Every other hour on the hour until the sun plunged behind the western skyline, he would be standing by to send or receive messages. Sometimes a week or ten days would pass without any code flashes across the endless expanse of Salt Desert's sandy floor. More often than not the messages he handled were as routine and dull as his and Vella's daily existence, dealing with the movements of army supply trains from the Colorado River boat landings, or weather reports, or official orders being exchanged by forts and stations scattered from one end of Arizona to the other.

But sometimes, the lives of cavalrymen out in the field would be entrusted to Owen Oliver. A missed signal or a mistake in copy could doom men to die by ambush. It was the sense of his own vital importance to the Army that made up for the routine and monotony of this job. Not one soldier in a hundred could take the grinding sameness, the intolerable heat, the soul-searing solitude of Signal Peak.

SIGNAL PEAK was a natural landmark of red sandstone and crusted lava strata, towering a thousand feet above the desert floor. It was the hub of the Army's territorial signal system, this station; and for Sergeant Oliver, that made it worthwhile.

But he could not remain here any longer. Vella was a grown woman now, with a woman's innate hungers for the niceties of life. Vella should be showing off her vivacious beauty down in Tucson, or back in the midwest somewhere—a village perhaps, like the one Owen had known as a boy, before the wanderlust had sent him West to become, in the run of time, a trapper and buffalo hunter and finally a wagon train guide.

He reached the crude rock enclosure atop the Peak, well aware of his shortness of breath and the way his old arrow wounds were torturing him, the way his overtaxed heart was slugging his ribs.

The old sergeant removed the canvas cover from his heliograph instrument. He polished the bright convex mirrors of the instrument with a chamois, and checked

the precise calibration of the telescope which, at day's beginning, was always focused on the signal station at High Mesa, invisible to the naked eye thirty miles across the desert to the southwest, another link in a chain of helio stations terminating at Fort Yuma.

From this lofty spot, breech-clouted Apache lookouts had once built their signal fires as they watched overland wagon trains—some of them with Owen Oliver as pilot—crawling like caterpillars across the raw land, westbound.

Here, spread out below him in a panorama that swept all the points of the compass, was a vista which nourished the spirits of a man of Owen Oliver's nature. A limitless vista it was, sandy malpais melting imperceptibly into purple heat-haze which seemed to lift the far mountains toward the sky, dissolving their granite roots from the Arizona earth.

Never was this inspiring view the same. It altered as the sun made its journey across the sky, creating a thousand different shadow patterns; it changed with the passage of the seasons. But this wasn't enough for Vella, his daughter. There was only one way to end it. That was to quit the army . . .

A flash of blinding white light snapped the old man's mind away from his personal problems and directed his attention to High Mesa, far to the southwest. A heliograph over there was flashing the day's first message.

Owen's brain automatically translated the pulsating twinkles into English cypher groups, copying the message on a slate set in the rock parapet handy to his reach. Decoding as he copied, Sergeant Oliver felt a cold rime of sweat dampen his skin:

CAVALRY COLUMN UNDER COMMAND LIEUTENANT GEORGE BRUSHING HEREBY ORDERED TO REPORT BACK TO FORT BOWIE WITHOUT DELAY. ARTILLERY DETACHMENT TO PROCEED TO FORT BRAGG CALIFORNIA FOR DUTY IN MODOC CAMPAIGN.

Other routine traffic followed, but the lead-off text was burning in Owen Oliver's brain in letters of fire and ice. It was signed by the Commanding General of the Army's Department of Arizona. For Sergeant Owen Oliver, who alone had been responsible for bringing Lieutenant Brushing's troops into the field, this official termination of the expedition was like a reprimand, as hard to take as a court martial would have been.

WORKING numbly, Oliver cranked his instrument around on its graduated quadrant to aim the telescope at Apache Bluff, due east, which was the station he would be reporting to at the next check-in time, two hours from now.

He restored the canvas cover to the heliograph and then picked up the high-powered binoculars he kept here at the station, lifting them to rake the cliffs of the long North Rim, twenty miles away.

Apaches in warpaint and fighting gear were hiding in the further mountains above North Rim, Oliver would stake his life on that. He had seen their signals fumbling into the Arizona sky repeatedly during the past two months; he had read those puffs of smoke for what they were. Chief Blue Sleeves was calling up his tribal strength for a full-scale strike on the white settlements along the valley of the Coyote River. The massacre raids would have already been in full swing had it not been for Brushing's troops, rushed over from Bowie to scout the situation.

Six weeks ago, at Oliver's desperate urging, the C.O. at Fort Bowie—crusty old Colonel Frank Cushman—had rushed a full company of cavalry with supporting artillery over to North Rim to break up the Apache concentration Oliver had reported. But Lieutenant Brushing had spotted no Indians whatsoever, and now Bowie was pulling the troops back to the Chiricahua country.

Oliver's glasses picked out the shadow-clotted gulf of Jackpine Pass, where Coyote River tumbled out of the mountains. A thin ribbon of smoke lifted from the canyon mouth, from the bivouac fires of Brushing's camp.

When the angle of the sun was right, later this morning, the signalman with Brushing's detachment would check in

with his routine contact with Signal Peak. For Brushing's troopers the order to quit the field would be welcome news—it was hell on horses and men, combing the North Rim badlands this time of year. For young Brushing, a shavetail on his first command, it would be an anticlimax.

This very minute, Oliver was willing to wager, keen-eyed Apache lookouts were spying on Brushing's camp from the rim of the Pass. The Indians had the strength to wipe out the cavalry column, but it was their superstitious dread of the "shooting sticks on wheels"—Brushing's howitzer battery—which held them back. Ever since field guns had routed Cochise and Mangas Coloradas in 1862's Battle of Apache Pass, the Indians had shunned artillery.

"Colonel Cushman will find out that I'm right," Oliver told himself, returning the glasses to their case. "Once the troops are out of the country, Blue Sleeves and his warriors will come swooping down the river. They'll have the valley settlements in ashes in two nights' time. . . ."

Beginning his descent of the peak trail to the adobe house the engineers had constructed for him and Vella, Oliver could see smoke beginning to curl from the rock chimney. Vella would have breakfast waiting for him. He wasn't even sure if his daughter knew what day this was.

As was his habit, Oliver's faded eyes studied the roundabout desert as he made his careful way down the path, favoring his left knee that still held an obsidian barb driven deep by a Mimbreno buck's bowstring. His eyes had a way of reading whatever story the desert had for him, day by day.

OLIVER saw now a feather of alkali dust lifting from the desert floor less than a mile from the peak—a lone rider, trailing a packhorse. A prospector, maybe, but more than likely it was Chet Andrade, who carried the pony mail for Wells Fargo to the Coyote Valley settlements, beyond the stagecoach service.

Thinking of Andrade, Sergeant Oliver's bruised spirits took a nose-dive into despair. Andrade had no official reason for his side trips to Signal Peak; the Olivers got their mail every month when the government pack trains visited them with supplies.

Oliver knew why Andrade included the peak on his itinerary. It was Vella that drew the Tucson mail rider up here. Andrade was the type who pomaded his mustaches and was given to wearing a gold-nugget watchchain and flashy rings on his fingers like a Mexican dandy.

Andrade filed notches on the backstraps of his silver-mounted Colts, an affectation which irritated Oliver. He bragged to Vella that each notch represented an Indian or a mail robber who had attempted to ambush him on the trail. And Vella swallowed every word of it.

Andrade visited the peak every third week, on his way back from his Coyote Valley circuit. Sergeant Oliver had begun to notice how Vella always prettied herself up the day Andrade was due. It rankled her father more than she knew.

Andrade had clever ways. Last trip, he had presented Vella with a vial of perfume, a cheap lavender such as Papago squaws drenched themselves with down at the Old Pueblo. But to Vella, receiving her first feminine fooferaw from a man, it was like a gift of distilled attar of roses from a Paris shop.

Her childlike delight in Andrade's attentions pointed up the girl's hunger for luxuries Oliver had never been able to give her. But in Oliver's skeptical eye, it branded the giver of the gift as a predatory animal. Chet Andrade was most likely the type who bragged of his amatory conquests when he was among men, the same way he boasted about the notches on his gunbutts in front of Vella.

"If Andrade asked her to marry him, she'd ask my blessing," Oliver thought bitterly. "If I refused to let her go she would stay with me, but things would never be the same again. From that day on she would brand me as a selfish old man, afraid to let his chick fly the nest . . ."

Nearing the house, he caught sight of Vella, her golden head framed in the narrow window of the kitchen. She was humming a snatch of hymn to herself, unaware

Two hundred Apaches were massed at the river's bend

of her father's approach; she was busy mixing pancake batter. The succulent odors of frying bacon and aromatic coffee wafted to the old man's nostrils; he tried to remember how long it had been since he had cooked any meals for himself.

At the doorway, the old sergeant tugged off his campaign hat and had another look at the dust-sign approaching on the Tucson Trail. It was Andrade, all right; he recognized the snow-white gelding and pack mule. He wondered if Vella knew.

VELLA was pouring his coffee when Owen Oliver hobbled into the neat little front room of the adobe. His daughter had converted this austere little cubicle, perched like a mud-dauber's nest eight hundred feet up Signal Peak, into a cozy home. Her ruffled curtains were at the window; her rag rugs adorned the rammed-earth floor.

"She knows Chet's on the way," the old man told himself, seeing the cactus bloom Vella was wearing over her right ear, the magenta petals in striking contrast to her golden hair. She was wearing a simple gingham frock—the best she had—which was tailored snugly to the supple curves of her young body. Right now, Oliver thought, his daughter made a sight to speed up any man's heart—even a lobo's like Chet Andrade.

"Dad," Vella greeted him cheerily, "do you know what day this is?"

Feigning puzzlement, he asked over the rim of his coffee cup, "Is any day different from another, here on the rock?"

Vella Oliver turned away from the cookstove, carrying a plate of golden brown pancakes to set before him.

"Today," she said, "is Chet Andrade's day. He's ahead of time. Didn't you see him coming up the trail just now? You're slipping, Dad."

A sense of anticlimax made it hard for old Owen to grin back at his daughter. His eye ranged across the room to the framed ambrotype of George Brushing which was Vella's memento of the year they had spent at Fort Bowie before coming out here to the Salt Desert signal station.

"I notice," he said, "you've forgotten to hide the corporal's picture so Andrade won't see it, honey."

"Corporal?" Vella echoed chidingly. "That's an unforgivable error for an army man to make, Dad. George is a lieutenant now. He got a promotion on the field during that fight with Cochise's band in the Dragoons last year."

Owen Oliver poured maple syrup on his flapjacks, avoiding his daughter's eyes. Yes, George Brushing was a commissioned officer now. Back at Bowie, when Vella had been wearing pigtails, Brushing had been a green kid fresh out of the recruiting barracks. He was twenty-three, a battle-seasoned Indian fighter with a record good enough for Colonel Cushman to have sent him to the North Rim country at the head of a column of troops, many of them twice Brushing's age.

That had been a proud moment for old Oliver, hearing the news that Cushman had selected young Brushing to investigate the hostiles Oliver was positive were massing for the warpath. He was reminded now of the message he had received for relaying to Brushing in the field.

"George is a fine man," Oliver said. "He'll go far in the army. You may be telling that to George face to face before long, Vella."

Vella glanced up from her seat across the table, astonishment in her eyes.

"George is coming here—to the Peak?"

Oliver shook his head. For some reason, he found himself unable to tell his daughter about the High Mesa orders.

"We're going back to Bowie, honey," he said, trying to keep his voice under control. "We're leaving this God-forsaken rock forever. We're going back to garrison duty."

Vella laid down her knife and fork, unable to comprehend the impact of her father's words. Signal Rock had been home for so long, she could not visualize being anywhere else.

"But they can't transfer you, Dad!" she protested. "Who else could handle this station as efficiently as you do?"

Oliver continued to stare at his plate.

He had never lied to Vella before. It came hard, lying to her now.

"You'll—you'll be glad to get away from this lonely spot, won't you, Vella? So far from female companions—"

Vella came to her feet, a faint effluvium of Andrade's detested lavender scent reaching the old soldier's nostrils.

"Leave Signal Rock? Leave the desert?" Vella was aghast. "Why, Dad—I love it here. You know that. The desert gets in your blood. I couldn't be happy anywhere else."

Yes, Oliver thought miserably, you mean every word of that. You're a true daughter of the desert.

"Dad," Vella said, rounding the table and stooping to plant a kiss on his leathery cheek, "did transfer orders come through for you this morning? Is that what you're trying to tell me? Does—does the army think you're getting too old for the job?"

OLIVER shoved back his chair and without answering his daughter, hobbled into his sleeping quarters in an adjoining room. When he returned he was carrying a parcel wrapped in brown paper, a parcel which Chet Andrade had picked up for him in Tucson and delivered to Signal Rock on his last trip.

"Happy birthday, Vella," Oliver husked out, handing her the package. "You're eighteen today. If we had a calendar around to measure time by, you'd have remembered."

Tears filled the old man's eyes at the childish joy which lighted Vella's face. She tore the wrappings off the parcel and revealed a matched set of jewelry in turquoise and silver, made by a Navajo craftsman from native Arizona materials—a set of earrings with matching bracelet and lavaliere necklace.

"Dad—it's lovely! It's too wonderful for words—"

She slipped the earrings through lobes which the contract surgeon had pierced for her on her twelfth birthday, against the day when she would be wearing jewelry. She slipped the bracelets on her sun-browned wrists and, pirouetting like a child, made her way to a wall mirror and began fitting the lavaliere to her throat.

She was like that when a spur jangled on the doorstep and a shadow darkened the cabin's entrance. Oliver jerked his gaze off his daughter and turned to see Chet Andrade, sweaty-faced and covered with the gray soda of the desert, sweeping off his flat-crowned hat and bowing low at the threshold.

"Got in a day early this trip," the pony mail rider announced suavely, "to wish you many happy returns of the day, Vella." He glanced at Sergeant Oliver, standing by, and his strong white teeth made their flash under his waxed mustache. "Howdy, Sarge. How does it feel, having a grown-up young lady instead of a tomboy kid on your hands?"

Owen Oliver grunted noncommittally, making no secret of his dislike for this Wells Fargo courier. Andrade was a swarthy, handsome man, wearing an ornately beaded buckskin jacket with long fringes at the sleeves, in cheap imitation of the *par fleche* Oliver himself had worn as a trapper when he was Andrade's age.

Andrade's gaudy ivory-handled sixguns hung in holsters low at either flank; when he tugged off his buckskin gauntlets his garish finger rings flashed dazzlingly. A Civil War medal hung from the breast of Andrade's jacket, although Oliver knew the man was too young to have earned the decoration legitimately during the War Between the States. Let him boast to Vella that he had been the youngest volunteer with Jeb Stuart's Texas battalion; it was another of Andrade's windies.

Breakfast forgotten, Sergeant Oliver hobbled outside and made his way down to the stable to saddle his packhorse for his weekly trip down to the waterhole at the base of the Peak, to replenish their water barrels. It went against the grain to leave Andrade alone with his daughter, even for the hour it would take him to descend to the springs and get back; but he didn't want to be around when Andrade handed Vella his birthday gift, knowing it would make his own present seem shabby by compari-

son Down in Tucson, Andrade had a rep for free spending.

Leading the packhorse down the steep switchbacks of the peak trail, Oliver stared across the miles toward Jackpine Pass and Brushing's camp. He thought, "The army won't transfer me, but I can quit. They'd hire me for a stable hand at Bowie. That way, I could get Vella and George to keeping company again."

They would make a handsome couple, George Brushing and Oliver's daughter. Nature, if given a chance, would take its own course. As a stripling corporal, six years ago, Brushing had been more than a little interested in Vella. Now that she was in the first bloom of lovely womanhood, she would attract Brushing again.

Even if it didn't work out, he told himself, at any rate it would get Vella away from Signal Peak . . . away from Chet Andrade's courtship.

BACK from his junket, Owen Oliver was unsaddling the pack animal down in the stable shed below the house when Vella came running down the path, her face aglow with an excitement which put a stab in the old man's heart.

"Here it comes," he thought desperately. "I'm a mite too late with my planning."

Vella threw her arms around her father and squeezed him tight.

"Daddy," she cried ecstatically, "guess what! Chester—well, he's—he's asked me to marry him. He says I'm of legal age now, and he's got a *cabaña* all picked out down in Tucson—"

Olivier's lips hardened under guarding sandy mustaches.

"He wants you to go with him—today?"

Vella shook her head. "He's not that brash, silly. I told him I couldn't be rushed into leaving Signal Peak. I'm to give him my answer a month from now, when he comes by on his next trip."

Relief flowed through the old man. A hell of a lot could happen in a month. What mattered was . . . had she given him her promise?

"You in love with him, baby?" Oliver asked quietly, his eyes boring into hers.

Vella looked away. "How can I know what being in love is?" she countered. "I—think I am. He's very handsome, and kind, and—well, you know. I think he would make a good husband."

A long run of silence came between them. Finally Oliver said, "Tucson is a dump, Vella; mud shacks and fat Papago Indians lounging everywhere. Flies and stinks and a saloon on every corner. Andrade's home for you—would be quite a change from Signal Peak."

Vella's face fell, her first flush of excitement cooling.

"I know—Tucson is a crowded, filthy place. But Chet won't be a mail rider always. He says Wells Fargo is sending him to San Francisco next year. He says it's lovely out in California. We could have a cottage overlooking the Pacific Ocean . . ."

Oliver placed gnarled hands on his daughter's shoulders.

"Promise me something, honey?"

"Of course, Dad. It—it isn't as if you'd be losing me. You would come to California to live with us, of course."

Oliver smiled bleakly, his heart full to bursting.

"Promise me you won't make it definite with Chet—not this trip. Tell him you'll have your answer when he shows up in September."

Vella's eyes widened. "Dad—that's what I told Chet. A lifetime is a long time to spend with a man. I couldn't accept—my first proposal—on the spur of the moment. And it doesn't mean we'll have to be separated, Dad. I couldn't endure the thought of being away from you. You know that."

Owen Oliver headed out of the stable, Vella following.

Andrade was seated in the shade of the ramada in front of the adobe when Oliver arrived there, flushed and wheezing from the exertion of his recent climb. The Wells Fargo man looked up expectantly, a grin dying on his lips as he removed a black Cuban cigar from his teeth and said, "Well, Sarge, aren't you going to congratulate your future son-in-law? Vella told you?"

Oliver came to a halt, measuring Andrade's indolent shape for a long moment

while he curbed his distaste for the man and his arrogant confidence. It would not do to order Andrade away before his customary day-long stay had run its course; that would put Vella on the defensive, make her rush to her suitor's side. Vella had a lot of her old man's stubbornness in her.

"It had to come some time, Chet. You're getting a fine girl. I think you know that."

Andrade settled back, edging over to one end of the crude wooden bench alongside the wall. "Sit down," he invited the old man. "We got a lot to talk over, I reckon. I want to know I got your blessing."

Oliver shook his head, gesturing toward the crest of the Peak.

"Due to check with the Apache Bluff station in forty minutes. We can talk later."

ANDRADE came to his feet, grinning at Vella. "No objection to me going up yonder with you, old-timer? I've never seen your helio rig close up."

Oliver hesitated, flashed a glance at Vella. "According to regulations," he said, "unauthorized personnel are not permitted at a signal station during operations."

Vella laughed at that. "Oh, Dad!" she chided him. "We don't go by the army book here; you know that. What are you afraid of—having Colonel Cushman drop in for a surprise inspection or something?"

Oliver grinned sheepishly. He couldn't tell these kids that his mind was in a turmoil, that he needed to concentrate on whatever business Apache Bluff might have for him.

"What are you afraid of, Sarge?" Andrade chuckled drily. "That I'll intercept Government secrets? Hell, I don't know a dot from a dash. All I want's a chance to chaw the rag with you about Vella's and my plans."

Oliver's warped shoulders lifted and fell. "Come on, then, and welcome," he grunted. "It won't be worth the climb, though, I'm warning you in advance."

Andrade flashed a tolerant grin at Vella, stuck his cigar between his teeth and set off after the old signalman. The path up to the helio rig was at a steep slant, following a spiral fault around the sandstone chimney, and within the first hundred feet the pony-mail rider fell behind, unable to keep up with Oliver's practiced, reaching strides.

Every time Brushing made a report from the field, it was to the effect that no sign of hostile Indians—or friendly Apaches, for that matter—had been seen in the mountainous area where Oliver had reported intercepting Blue Sleeves's messages.

It was almost as if the Indians had a counterspy system working which told them in advance of every move Brushing's troops were making. And yet that was impossible; army messages were transmitted in Morse code, which no Indian could read, and even if some renegade deserter from the Signal Corps intercepted any messages, they would be unintelligible, being in cypher.

The fact that Brushing had been unable to locate a single redskin in a zone which Oliver knew to be swarming with Apaches was ominous. The Indians were dodging the Long Knives, obviously—and Colonel Cushman back at Bowie had made up his mind that if his field expedition saw no Indians, then no Indians were to be seen.

But Blue Sleeves, head chieftain of the North Rim Apaches, was outmaneuvering the army this summer. How else would they have been able to intercept the ordnance wagons hauling arms and ammunition to Fort Yuma last June? They had left no survivors behind to report details, but the fact remained that enough rifles and ammunition had vanished to outfit a regiment.

News of that ordance train's passage had been a carefully guarded secret, last spring. Yet the Indians, swooping down off the North Rim, had intercepted the caravan out on the edge of Salt Desert, almost in sight of Signal Peak.

REACHING his heliograph rig, Oliver had time only for a minute's rest when he saw the Apache Bluff station giving the stand-by signal, waiting for ac-

knowledgment that Signal Peak was ready for traffic.

He hastily removed the canvas cover from the telescope, checked the calibration of his mirrors to pick up the sun's image and channel it into the telescope, and was blinking his readiness call when Chet Andrade climbed over the rock parapet and slumped down on a bench, cheeks flaming scarlet from the heat of his climb.

"Don't see how an old duffer like you can do it. It would gant me down to the bone, making this climb six times a day."

He got no answer from Oliver, who was concentrating on copying the incoming signals from Apache Bluff. Routine stuff: a paymaster's detachment would be arriving in this area the following week and requested an escort platoon from Fort Torrid to accompany it to the Gila.

Incoming traffic completed, Oliver reached for the slate on which he had copied the orders from High Mesa for transmittal to Lieutenant Brushing's column in the field. It was part of regulations to relay such orders to the next station in the chain, for purposes of verification.

Andrade got to his feet and stared over Oliver's shoulder at the chalked characters on the slate which the old sergeant was now flashing across the miles to Apache Bluff. This was top-secret information and no outsider, no civilian should lay eyes on that slate; but Oliver was not concerned with this breech of security. A Wells Fargo mail rider would not be apt to know the Morse code; in any event, the message was in cypher, the key to which could only be obtained from a government code book or, as in Oliver's case, hidden in the operator's brain.

During a pause for Apache Bluff to repeat a phrase, Chet Andrade muttered in bewilderment. "That stuff make any sense to anybody, Sarge? Looks like Chinese to me."

Oliver grunted something unintelligible and went on with his transmission, his fingers manipulating the heliograph shutter with deft precision.

The message ended, Oliver stepped to one side to copy Apache Bluff's acknowledgment and sign off. The old sergeant's eye shuttled over to the convex mirror on the near end of his instrument's scope, and saw the crazily distorted reflection of Chet Andrade reflected on its silvered surface.

Andrade was squinting off past Oliver's shoulder, eyes fixed on the remote flashes of light from Apache Bluff. But what held Oliver's attention to the rider's mirrored image on the silvered glass dish was the barely perceptible movements of Andrade's lips, the flashings of his white teeth.

"Why," the chilling thought struck Oliver. "Andrade's reading that Morse!"

There could be no doubt of that, despite what Andrade had said about heliograph code being so much gibberish to him. His lips were moving unconsciously with each flashed letter from Apache Bluff's remote station:

W-I-L-L C-H-E-C-K B-A-C-K A-T N-O-O-N
S-H-A-R-P F-O-R F-U-R-T-H-E-R T-R-A-F-F-I-C
R-E-G-A-R-D-S.

The business was finished. Oliver's seamed face held no hint of his inner turmoil as he turned away from the instrument, stooping to unlock the weatherproof box which held his well-worn official station logbook.

Andrade's face was equally inscrutable. Grinning, the mail rider commented, "Always seem like a miracle to me, the way you army people talk to each other with mirrors."

Oliver shrugged, taking out his pipe and tobacco pouch.

"Simple as the ABC's, Chet. Dot-dash for A, a single dot for E, a single dash for T, and so on. Want me to teach you the rudiments some time . . . seeing as how we're going to be related?"

Andrade laughed, chucking his cigar butt over the rock wall.

"Naw. Got no need to know code talk, unless I went to work for Overland Telegraph, which ain't likely for any man who works for Wells Fargo." Andrade gestured toward the slate covered with High Mesa's cypher.

"What does that spell out, Sarge? Looks like a puzzle."

OLIVER got out his flint and steel and the business of getting his pipe lighted gave him a chance for some fast thinking. Andrade was taking elaborate pains to deny any knowledge of Morse code. Yet he had unquestionably read every letter of the message Apache Bluff had just transmitted. And now he was fishing for information.

"Why, that's military cypher," Oliver said. "Key to it is in our code books."

"What does it say—unless I'm prying into army business, Sarge?"

Blue smoke purled from Oliver's nostrils,

The man rolled clear

his eyes drilling into Andrade's, forcing the mail rider to lower his gaze.

"Headquarters is pulling Lieutenant Brushing's horse soldiers back to Bowie," Oliver said. "Sending the artillery over to Fort Bragg in California. Government expects trouble with the Modocs over west and needs howitzers."

Andrade nodded, apparently only half listening. "Sarge," he said earnestly, "about me marrying Vella. You got any objections? I mean, you've never been overly friendly toward me. Let's face it. You think I'm a tinhorn. You could undermine my chances with Vella, if you set your mind to it during the month I'll be away."

Oliver shook his head slowly. "I give you my word," he said, "I won't say a word ag'in you, Chet. Vella's a grown woman. When it comes to choosing a man I won't stand in her way."

Andrade grinned and clapped Oliver on the back. "Thanks, old-timer," he said gratefully. "I'll be getting back to the house. Vella an' me got lots of plans to make."

For a long time after Chet Andrade had made his departure, Oliver stood leaning his elbows on the stone windbreak surrounding his heliograph rig, his eyes staring off across the desert to Jackpine Pass.

"Brushing's cavalry could be wiped out by them Apaches," he said out loud, "once Blue Sleeves sees they ain't backed up with cannon. Relaying them orders would be the same as signing Brushing's death warrant. But orders are orders . . ."

The thought of insubordination to the service which ruled his life had never once entered Sergeant Owen Oliver's mind. But now a wild, desperate plan was shaping up.

A heliograph mirror blinked with blinding intensity over in the milky layers of haze which obscured the mouth of Jackpine Pass. Brushing's signal orderly was making his regular daily check-in with Signal Peak. Oliver copied the incoming code, knowing the unvarying words by heart:

NO SIGN OF HOSTILES YET, ANYTHING FOR US TODAY SARGE SIGNED BRUSHING.

Moving with swift competence, Oliver adjusted his helio 'scope to bear northward, centering the cross-hairs of the finder on the vivid flash of light from the cavalry column's location.

He picked up the slate with the message he was supposed to relay to the waiting operator twenty miles across the desert, re-reading it carefully, making up his mind what to do, steeling himself for what he must do:

CAVALRY COLUMN UNDER LIEUTENANT BRUSHING HEREBY ORDERED TO REPORT BACK TO FORT BOWIE WITHOUT DELAY. ARTILLERY DETACHMENT TO PROCEED TO FORT BRAGG CALIFORNIA FOR DUTY IN MODOC CAMPAIGN.

Oliver's hand was trembling as he reached for the shutter lever. What he was about to do could bring a court-martial and a long prison term. Falsifying an official order was a cardinal sin. When Colonel Cushman heard about it he would go berserk.

Oliver's fist became rock-steady as he flashed back a message for Lieutenant George Brushing's field headquarters:

LIEUTENANT BRUSHING WILL REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO SIGNAL PEAK STATION FOR URGENT SECRET ORDERS. ACKNOWLEDGE AND REPEAT. STANDING BY FOR CHECK.

There was a ten-minute delay from Jackpine Pass. Oliver visualized the excitement which his message had caused over there. The signalman would be dispatching a runner to Lieutenant Brushing's headquarters tent.

When the reply came back Oliver knew the die was irrevocably cast:

LEAVING AT ONCE ARRIVE YOUR STATION MID-AFTERNOON BRUSHING.

Oliver mopped his face with a bandanna. In a few minutes, Lieutenant George Brushing would be turning over his command to a subordinate—his top sergeant probably—and would be streaking across the desert on horseback, heading for the pinnacle of Signal Peak.

THIRTY MINUTES later Owen Oliver hobbled across the threshold of his cabin, to see Vella busy at her loom, weaving another rug. She was wearing a tortoise-shell comb and a Spanish mantilla, and despite the heat of the day she had a costly Castillian shawl of exquisite black lace over her shoulders.

"Chet's birthday present, Dad," Vella said, springing to her feet and dropping him a curtsy. "He got it for me to wear at fiestas in Tucson this fall."

Oliver glanced around the room, sniffing the odor of Andrade's cigar but not spotting the Wells Fargo man.

"Chet's taking a snooze in my room?"

Vella shook her head. "He's left, Dad. Wells Fargo needed him back as soon as possible. He couldn't wait out the day and travel by night, as he usually does. The poor man—he'll fry out on Salt Desert, a day like this."

Oliver felt a shiver coast down his spine. This news was not unexpected. Chet Andrade had made no mention of an early departure when he was with Oliver an hour ago; something mighty urgent must have come up to call him away from Vella's side so prematurely . . .

Making some excuse about rubbing down the packhorse, Oliver hurried down to the barn. From that location he had a clear view of the desert stretching off to the south, toward Tucson. Andrade should be in clear view; he could hardly have covered more than a mile from the base of the peak by now.

There was no sign of the rider or his packmule; no feather of dust rising off the undulating floor of the desert, no spidery tracks of a fresh trail across the dunes.

It could signify nothing—or everything. Forced to travel in daylight—a practice which any desert traveler avoided at this season of the year when the temperature rose above one hundred and thirty in the open—Chet Andrade might be keeping to the bottom of some arroyo, out of sight.

By the same token, the Wells Fargo man might have cut north, toward the rim—toward a rendezvous with Chief Blue Sleeves's Apaches.

Oliver felt better inside, now. The enormity of his crime against the army—failure to transmit urgent travel orders to the field command—did not seem so important in the light of Andrade's mysterious hurry to get away from Signal Peak.

Maybe he was dead wrong about Andrade being in league with the redskins. If so, he would take the consequences. But if he was right, then Lieutenant Brushing and his cavalrymen might be alive two days from now to fight again, instead of being massacred by overwhelming Apache forces. And the settlers along Coyote Valley would gain a new lease on life this summer. . . .

Sergeant Oliver was taking his customary sleep between the two and four o'clock duty appointments up at the helio rig when

he was roused by excited voices in the front room—Vella and a visitor. Oliver could hear a horse's shod hoofs pawing the flinty path outside the ramada, blowing dust from its nostrils, its lungs heaving from the hard, short climb up the peak's zigzag trail.

Oliver swung his legs off the bed, glancing at the clock on the marble-topped dresser. Three-thirty. George Brushing had made good time crossing the desert from Jackpine Pass.

Oliver stole over to the door and opened it a crack. This was the first time Vella had seen her dashing young corporal in six years; it was not a moment to intrude upon.

He hardly recognized George Brushing; the man had gained his full growth and his maturity was as striking as Vella's. His blue uniform with the yellow outseams of the cavalry arm running down his trousers was gray with the desert's alkali, dark with sweat stains; his thick, curling black hair was plastered against his skull and his face was red with the sun's punishment.

AT THIS MOMENT of reunion with the girl he had known as a gangling tomboy at Fort Bowie, Lieutenant Brushing was holding her at arm's length, his shining eyes drinking in the full beauty of her.

"Vella, it is you, isn't it?" Brushing said in an awed, somehow shy voice. "Why, you—you're downright ravishing. You're like a flower in full bloom."

Vella's face was shining. Brushing's arrival here was out of the blue; she had known that her friend was in command of the field expedition over in the North Rim country these past weeks, and had exchanged personal greetings with him via the heliograph. But to see him in the flesh, young and virile and handsome . . .

"Lieutenant, you old flatterer, you!" Vella giggled. "I declare, you must be the idol of every unattached girl on the post. A lieutenant's bars become you, George."

Brushing's glance finally broke away from the girl, to stare at the picture of himself on the nearby shelf, an ambrotype taken by the garrison photographer, showing Brushing as a raw rookie fresh from Jefferson Barracks, his arms grotesquely thrust out in front of him so as to show off his new corporal's stripes to advantage.

"You—you still got my picture, Vella!" George Brushing said, embarrassment in him. "And I've still got yours, and the lock of hair you gave me when you and your dad left the post—"

Brushing reached to unbutton his tunic. From an inner pocket he drew forth a flat wallet and from it he took an isinglass envelope holding a lock of hair like spun gold . . .

Vella turned away, pleased but self-conscious. She said, "This is such a surprise, George. I had no idea you were going to pay us a visit. I—I didn't have time to pretty up for you—"

Brushing grinned. "You couldn't look any prettier than you do now, Vella . . ." He broke off, his face sobering. "My coming is a surprise? Didn't your father tell you? It was his signal at eight o'clock that brought me over here on the double."

Owen Oliver took that moment to make his appearance from the side room. Brushing wheeled to face him, his lips twisting in awkward embarrassment as the old noncom raised an arm in salute.

Returning the gesture, Brushing said, "Sarge, it doesn't seem fitting, my outranking you. Back at Bowie, when you got your three stripes, I worshiped you like a four-star general."

Oliver turned to his daughter. "I've got to see George alone, honey. Military business. Too important to discuss in front of a loose-tongued female."

Vella blinked. "Why, Dad!"

Oliver said gravely, "When I'm finished with the lieutenant you can have him to yourself until sundown, and talk his ears off. Right now, honey, I've got to have a powwow with our young officer. Big business is in the making, and George is going to be in the middle of it."

Vella shrugged and made her way out to the front ramada, discreetly shutting the door behind her. George Brushing's eyes

were round with wonderment as he seated himself at Oliver's signal.

"WHAT'S UP, Sarge?" the young cavalry officer asked in a tight voice. "I know your message said 'secret orders—"

Oliver packed and lighted his briar. "Lieutenant," he said, "you have contacted no hostiles on this expedition to date, I understand?"

Brushing shook his head. "None," he admitted. "And I've hunted, Sarge, believe me. Oh," he continued, "we've found isolated bunches of squaws harvesting mescal and piñon nuts in the high country, of course. But no warpaint—"

Oliver hitched his chair forward. He tapped his pipestem on the young officer's knee. "Son," he said, "we've got some strategy to outline. We'll be running afoul of orders to pull it off. Your career could be at stake. The blame rests on my shoulders—but if I'm wrong, you'll suffer as well. It's part of the weight of command."

Brushing unbuckled his saber and laid it aside. His young face was grimly serious as he met Oliver's enigmatic stare.

"Let's have it on the line, Sarge," he said. . . .

An hour had ticked by on the Swiss clock over their council meeting when Sergeant Oliver stood up, suddenly aware that he had not kept his four o'clock signal appointment with High Mesa. It was the first time in the six years he had held down this post that such an oversight had occurred.

"What it amounts to is using your company as bait for a redskin trap, Lieutenant," Oliver summed up their discussion. "It'll end up with you either a hero or a goat. You'll get a medal or a court-martial out of it. I leave the final decision up to you."

Brushing came shakily to his feet. "You know how obedience to discipline is grained into a man when the army is his master, Sarge. But I have faith in your judgment, if old man Cushman hasn't. I'll do it, sir."

Oliver grinned.

"Sometimes an officer has to fly in the face of orders, for the welfare of his troops," he reminded Brushing. "I know—you're thinking of Custer; but this will be different. It's a gamble."

He hauled out his watch. "Got to get up to the station," he said. "You'll ride back after sundown, of course. Until then, Vella is thirsty for gossip from the post, George."

Brushing grinned shyly. "She's grown up into a beauty, Sarge. There isn't a woman at Bowie can hold a candle to Vella."

Oliver gestured toward Brushing's picture on the shelf.

"She'll kill me for saying this," the old man said confidentially, "but you're a Prince Charming on a white bronc to my little girl, George. You always have been, since she was a kid."

Brushing colored furiously. "For me," he admitted haltingly, "there never was anybody to compare to Vella Oliver, Sarge."

Oliver hobbled outside, Brushing remaining in the doorway. Vella was out in her terraced cactus garden, watering her desert plants.

"He's all yours, honey," the old man chuckled. "Don't pry into what we talked about, now. Army secrets."

On his way up the winding path to the helio station, Oliver felt younger than he had in years. Rounding the shoulder of the peak, he glanced back to see Vella and the young lieutenant seating themselves on the ramada bench, hands touching.

"I've planted the seed," the old man told himself. "I figger they'll grow, even with time so short. Alongside of Andrade, the kid must look pretty fine."

THE FOLLOWING DAY dawned cloudy, presaging summer storms on the desert, electrical disturbances in the mountains. According to yesterday's meteorological reports from the army's weather experts at High Mesa, the bad weather would last seventy-two hours, which to men in the heliograph service meant a three-day holiday. Their instruments were useless except in clear weather. Because Arizona's sun could be depended on ninety per cent of the year, the army

had foregone the expense of running telegraph lines between its frontier forts.

A vast restlessness was in Sergeant Owen Oliver this morning, being cut off from the earth-shaking events which would be impending tomorrow. He was the direct author of those events; Lieutenant Brushing's troop column was a pawn being maneuvered over Arizona's vast chessboard at Oliver's dictation. He knew now how a high-ranking general felt, putting his ideas of strategy into actual operation.

By mid-morning, a dust cloud was forming at the northern edge of Salt Desert, plainly visible against the red cliffs of the Rim.

The field glasses identified the source of that dust: Brushing's field artillery battery, moving westward toward California and a change of station.

Oliver could see the muleteams dragging the heavy howitzers along the sandy terrain, with the supply train bringing up the rear. Apache lookouts would be watching from the North Rim, this morning, watching the dreaded Shooting Sticks on Wheels plodding their way westward.

The artillery detachment would travel slowly, held back by the dragging weight of ammunition caissons and the heavy cannon. Sundown would probably see them only ten miles from Brushing's camp at the mouth of Jackpine Pass.

Swinging the glasses eastward, Oliver could dimly make out the crawling blue line of Brushing's cavalry, daylight glinting dully on sabers and brass buttons, as the homeward-bound troops rode in a column of twos along the approaches to Coyote River's long canyon.

By noon, the cavalrymen and their packmule train had dipped from view down into the river's gorge. They would follow the Coyote out into its broad valley, if Brushing carried out the orders of his commanding general. . . .

Vella remained silent today, knowing her father was preoccupied with whatever business he and Lieutenant Brushing had discussed yesterday afternoon. The young cavalry officer had ridden away from the Peak after dark last night, returning to his command. Vella had followed George Brushing to the foot of the Peak, and when she returned, old Oliver did not miss the flush of excitement lingering on his daughter's cheeks.

"He kissed you good-by," the old man had chuckled, teasing her. "And you liked it."

Vella did not try to deny it. "I told George you were being transferred back to Bowie. He was very happy about it, Dad."

"On account of having me around to salute him—or because he'd be able to squire you to the regimental dances next winter?"

Vella looked around the walls of the little adobe shanty she had transformed into a home for her father.

"Knowing George will be there," she confessed, "will take the sting away from leaving Signal Peak, Dad."

Oliver had played his ace, then. "Where does that leave Chet Andrade? He'll be disappointed, coming back next month to pick up his bride-to-be, and finding some substitute taking my place."

Vella looked him square in the eye. "Chet—isn't for me, Dad. Oh, I know—I was all flustered this morning when he was here. But compared to George . . . Dad, I guess I'm just a fickle woman."

Tears had misted Owen Oliver's eyes at that. "George has loved you since you were a kid, Vella. He—he told me that, yesterday."

Vella looked away. "We—didn't talk about love, of course," she said. "Just now, seeing George ride off . . . He just kissed me on the cheek and said 'See you at Bowie.' But I knew then I would be writing to Chet, telling him it wouldn't work out. I'm returning his presents, Dad. He—he probably will find some other girl to give them to."

WITH CLOUDY WEATHER relieving him of the necessity of visiting his helio station on the peak every two hours, Owen Oliver retired to his room immediately after eating his noon meal.

Lying there on his bunk, trying to rest

but finding himself as keyed up and tense as an over-wound clock spring, Oliver's glance centered on his field desk.

He got up, opened the desk with a key which was rarely out of the lock, and fished his official station logbook from its drawer.

"Andrade used to rest a couple of hours in this room, every trip he made here," Oliver was thinking. "I was a blind fool, too careless to deserve my stripes."

He reached for another drawer and drew out the government code book. Why, he thought dismally, this was right here for Andrade to study in private. He had plenty of opportunity to memorize our cyphers, or copy them down.

It all tied together. Maybe the object of Andrade's visits to the peak this year had not been Vella, after all. Maybe Andrade had been interested in his heliograph code book as much as striking up a romance with a beautiful girl. . . .

By three o'clock, Owen Oliver knew he could never endure this inactivity. He stalked out to the cactus garden where Vella was tending her plants, and he was carrying his saddlebags and carbine.

"Honey," the old sergeant announced, "I'm taking advantage of this cool spell. I'm riding over to Brushing's camp tonight. You'll be safe here."

Vella nodded, glancing down the steep path leading to the buildings. An iron gate could be swung across that path, midway down the trail, and no rider, Indian or prospector or other visitor, could get past it.

"I'll be back tomorrow," Oliver promised her, wishing he could shake off the tiny cloud of premonition that weighed down his spirits. "No special reason for the jaunt—just got an itch to straddle a horse again."

Vella accompanied him to the barn, filling a sack of oats for her father's US-branded roan stallion while he was saddling up. He handed her the key to the padlock for the gate which would blockade the lower trail, and he tried to act off-hand as he kissed her and stepped into stirrups.

"When you see George," Vella said shyly, "tell him—"

"I'll give him your love," Oliver grinned, and spurred off down the steep trail.

"That wasn't what I was going to say," his daughter called after him, "but it will do."

Reaching the floor of the desert, Oliver turned his horse northwest in the direction of Jackpine Pass, knowing Vella expected him to ride that way; she would be able to keep him in sight for the first ten miles of his journey, before the sand hills cut off his view of Signal Peak.

It gave him a sense of exhilaration, being back in the saddle again. He got in some riding from time to time, to keep the roan from getting fat and useless; but now he rode with the zest that came from knowing he would soon become a part of the strategic operation he had set in motion.

BY SUNDOWN he was half the distance to Brushing's deserted campground at the entrance of the Pass. He made a dry camp, eating from field rations he had packed in his saddle pouches, and when full dark enveloped the desert he turned southeast and set his course on the landmark known as Castle Rock, a peak lifting above the west rim of the Coyote River Canyon.

It was around midnight when a shifting wind brought to Oliver's keening ears the sound of wheels rumbling over patches of scab rock, off to his left, and the strike of steel-shod hoofs.

He veered in that course, topping a rise to see silhouetted against the stars on the crest of an opposite ridge a moving column of riders and heavy wheeled equipment.

This was Brushing's artillery, Battery B from Fort Bowie, which during the daylight hours had been headed west toward California. Since dark the caissons and field cannon had been angling at a sharp rearward angle, moving as rapidly as mules could haul the massive howitzers.

A pleased grin touched the old sergeant's mouth. At dusk he had glimpsed campfires burning at the base of the North Rim, marking the end of the artillery detachment's travel for the day; those fires were still twinkling in the distance. Any Apache

scouts spying on the column's progress would assume that the artillerymen were camping for the night.

There was no moon to betray the forced march these men were making, heading for the Coyote River's gorge and Castle Rock. Blue Sleeves's waiting warriors would have no inkling of this counter-maneuver.

He touched spurs to the roan and headed down into the shadowed vale, riding to intercept the head of the column. Knowing that flankers might spot him he sent his halloo ahead, and instantly noncoms were barking orders and the column came to a halt.

"Who goes?" a voice reached Oliver, who was sending his horse in short bucking jumps up the sand hill's slope.

"Sergeant Oliver, Fort Bowie signal detachment!" Oliver called back. "Hold your fire, buckos. I'm riding in."

Formless shapes on horseback were deployed along the line of field guns and caissons as Oliver gained the crest of the ridge. Soldiers with carbines at the ready closed in on the old signalman, alert for treachery.

"Who's in command here?" Oliver said, reining up.

A rider spurred forward, squinting at this unexpected visitor through the darkness. The overcast sky blotted out the stars.

"I am Captain Olson," the rider identified himself. "You'll be the Signal Peak man who relayed our orders to Lieutenant Brushing today?"

"Owen Oliver, Captain," the old man said, saluting briskly. "Thought you might use a guide to reach Castle Rock."

A match flared in Captain Olson's fist; by its brief spurt of light the artilleryman had his close look at the figure in uniform who had the crossed flags of the Signal Corps for a hat insignia.

"This whole thing has my command guessing, Sergeant," the captain admitted. "Mr. Brushing sketched out the general idea. You think the Apaches will try to box in the cavalry column over in the canyon tonight, I understand."

Oliver nodded. "The redskins saw Brushing's artillery support pull out, you can bet your last blue chip on that," he explained. "That's what Blue Sleeves has been waiting for. The Indians are deathly afraid of your thundersticks, Captain. But they would like nothing better than a chance to tackle Brushing's pony soldiers—especially when they've got them trapped between five-hundred-foot cliffs."

CAPTAIN OLSON barked the order to get his column rolling again. He and Oliver spurred to the front of the line where they were out of the dust, heading steadily toward the looming crest of Castle Rock, overgrown with chaparral and jackpine timber.

"As Mr. Brushing explained it to me," the artillery officer said, "he'll be camped in the canyon directly below Castle Rock. He figures the Apaches will strike at dawn—from the north and south."

Oliver grinned. "That's how they like to work. They don't fight at night. Daylight's their time. I know. I've been through more than one Apache ambush in my time."

Captain Olson laughed softly. "I've heard about you for years, Sergeant," he admitted. "You aim to have my howitzers planted out of sight on Castle Rock, then, and pulverize those savages when they move in for the attack?"

"That's the general idea, Captain."

Olson hipped around in saddle, the darkness obscuring the baffled look on his lean face.

"But how in hell do you know the Apaches will attack, Sergeant? We haven't located any warriors in weeks."

"I've been reading Blue Sleeves's smoke signs all summer. The valley settlements are what the Apaches are set on for their massacre raid. If they can wipe out a whole company of troops, so much the better."

The artilleryman laughed. "I've got to hand it to Colonel Cushman," he said. "Figuring up this scheme, sending my field guns off on a feint to put the Indians off guard and using the pony soldiers to bait

the trap. Cushman's sharper than I gave him credit for."

Oliver made no comment.

An hour's forced march brought them to the base of Castle Rock. From here on, utter secrecy, utter silence was of the essence. Placing Olson's artillery battery atop the Rock was the key to this whole business; if knowledge of their presence here reached the Apache, there would be no attack.

It was rough going, hauling the field pieces to the timbered crest of Castle Rock. From here on, Olson was working blind; the pit of the river's canyon directly below them to the east was hidden in blackness.

Somewhere down there where the river brawled over its rocky bed, George Brushing's cavalry troop were camped for the night. Further up-canyon, if Oliver's reasoning was correct, Coyotero Apaches were moving up through the darkness, their sound of passage obliterated by the thundering rapids.

Another band of Blue Sleeves's Indians would be bypassing the cavalry camp along the far side of the canyon to box the white soldiers in, cutting off any chance of escape. Owen Oliver knew the terrain here like the pages of a familiar book; he knew the only side canyons where an Indian force could move into the main gorge were all on the far side.

THE FIRST shimmering of a new day was lighting up the eastern skyline when Captain Olson had his guns in position, their lethal snouts hidden from view behind the brush. Ammunition was stacked by each gun; the troopers of Battery B knew their business.

Oliver slipped away from the hidden artillery positions as gray daylight made it possible to ride. Keeping to the dense timber, he worked his way up-canyon to the mouth of a narrow defile entering the main gorge.

From this rimrock position he could see down into the canyon now; he could make out the herd of cavalry horses belonging to the men of George Brushing's command, and knew the troopers were coming out of their bedrolls down in the sparse timber.

Crawling out on the cliff's verge, Oliver looked up the canyon toward Jackpine Pass. From this overhead vantage point, he spotted movement along the riverbanks, hidden from the cavalry camp's view by a bend in the cliffs.

Copper-skinned Apache bucks were leading their war ponies forward on either side of the river, confident that they were invisible from the palefaces camped around the bend. Blue Sleeves had risen to the bait; he had brought his Apache fighting force out of hiding, following Brushing downriver during the night.

The Indians moved past Oliver's position, and the sergeant shot a quick glance at the timbered height of Castle Rock. There was nothing in view there to indicate the poised readiness of Olson's artillery. By now, Oliver knew the cannoneers must have spotted their potential targets. Other guns, bearing down-canyon, would be ready to crush any attack from that direction with a devastating hail of shrapnel.

Crawling back to his horse, Oliver mounted and headed up-canyon, keeping well back from the rimrock, making for the side defile he remembered from his last trip to this country. Here was where a savvy of the terrain was all-important.

Reaching the defile, Oliver reined up, tied his roan to a juniper snag, and worked his way back to the cliff brink for another view of the canyon bottom.

The Apaches were massed at the bend of the river now, at least two hundred of them, mounted on fleet, unshod ponies, each armed with Springfields and Colts stolen from the government supply train last winter.

And then Oliver singled out Blue Sleeves, recognizing the wily old Apache chief by the feathers jutting from his topknot and the frayed blue army shirt which was his badge of rank in the Coyotero tribe.

Now the sun was within minutes of appearing over the Arizona horizon; the gray daylight was filtering into the gorge. Here was the thing dear to the fighting heart of the Apache—a dawn raid on a sleepy camp which was unaware of danger.

He saw Blue Sleeves lift his rifle to signal the charge; and then the Indians were venting their war-whoops, a cacophony of indescribable sound above the river's thunder. Oliver's belly muscles tensed as he saw the Apache leader front the surprise charge around the river's curve to bring them in sight of Brushing's cavalry camp; and at that instant smoke and flame volleyed from the brush and jackpine growth atop Castle Rock and a deluge of streaking artillery missiles smashed the ranks of charging hostiles.

Exploding shells made a cascading violence of sound down in the canyon; shrapnel was blasting the close-packed ranks of the Apaches. Further along the towering shoulder of Castle Rock, Captain Olson's batteries covering the southern approach to the cavalry camp were joining the cannonading now, proof that the Indians had a force coming up the river to cut off retreating cavalrymen.

Forewarned, Brushing's troops would be dug in behind trees and rocks. Blue Sleeves was not invading a sleeping camp. Small-arms fire would add to the terrific toll of the cannon pouring destruction down from above.

OLIVER waited to see no more. Back in saddle, he sent the roan skidding down the steep defile into the Coyote's gorge, rifle in readiness to meet any Indians breaking away from the holocaust up at Brushing's camp.

He reached the level of the river and was out of saddle when he saw the first wild-eyed Apache riders cutting back up the river, in panic-stricken rout. The trappers had been trapped and now the survivors were in flight. As had been the case at Apache Pass years before, Apache courage wilted before the exploding shells of paleface shooting-sticks.

Behind a barricade of boulders, Owen Oliver had his rifle trained on the leader of the oncoming Apaches, when he saw the white man in their midst, a paleface who had kept well to the rear of the attacking Indian column and was therefore in a position to escape the flying shrapnel which had butchered his redskinned companions.

There was something inevitable about seeing Chet Andrade spurring his Wells Fargo stallion up the trail in the midst of mounted Apache riders. Andrade had carried his traitorous news to Blue Sleeves and had accompanied the Indian force on its abortive stalk of Brushing's company.

The first of the fleeing Indians streaked past Oliver's concealed position without drawing his fire. When Andrade was in the open, Oliver came to his feet and let the Tucson man get clear sight of him. The Springfield at Oliver's shoulder thundered and brought down Andrade's horse in full stride. He had aimed for the mount instead of the rider, for Andrade was a prisoner who must be taken alive.

Andrade kicked his boots clear of stirrups and with swift skill got clear of the falling horse. He landed on all fours in the trailside brush and rolled free of the Indian riders vaulting his fallen mount.

Owen Oliver discarded his clumsy rifle and had his Army .45 palmed as he threaded through the rocks to close in on the traitor. Across a distance of a dozen paces he saw Chet Andrade come to his feet, white teeth glittering in a panicked grimace.

"I'm taking you in alive, Chet," Oliver said coldly, thumbing his gunhammer to full cock. "I want you to tell a court-martial how come you got wise to our code—"

Andrade had a sixgun out of leather now. Defying Oliver's drop, he drove a single shot at the old signalman, before Oliver's bullet caught him in the left eye and dropped him in the brush. . . .

It was well along toward noon before Lieutenant George Brushing and a party of cavalry privates rounded the turn of the canyon on an exploratory detail and found old Owen Oliver hunkered down beside Andrade's corpse, puffing a pipe.

"Wells Fargo courier," Oliver explained, gesturing toward the dead man. "He's the key to the whole thing. Claimed he couldn't read code, but the other morning I found out he was lying. Let him think Bowie was recalling your company and sending the artillery out to California. He passed

the word along to the Apaches. That's why Blue Sleeves has been outguessing the army—"

Young George Brushing squatted down to roll Andrade over on his back. "Why," the cavalry officer said wonderingly, "this man deserted the service three years ago, during the Chiricahua campaign. He was a signalman at Bowie after you left, Sarge. His name was Dave Dorking on our roster."

Oliver came to his feet and knocked the dottle out of his pipe. "How'd it go this morning?" he asked.

The troopers with Brushing laughed. "Pretty close to a total wipe-out, Sarge," Brushing reported. "For once the cavalry owes something to the artillery branch. Olson's battery is already pulling out for California, as per departmental orders."

Oliver said, "Time I was getting back to the rock and Vella. I'll be showing up with my little girl at Bowie, soon as they send a relief operator out to Signal Peak, George. I figure it's about time I retired. I'm overage as it is—but the army doesn't know that. I lied about my age when I enlisted."

Brushing grinned. "You know," he said, "I'm in command here. I'll leave my signalman at the Peak to replace you. I'm riding back with you, Sarge, so we can arrive at Fort Bowie together. I don't see any reason why Colonel Cushman should ever know you tinkered with his orders yesterday."

Owen Oliver thought that over and found it good. There was no use asking for trouble. What the army didn't know wouldn't hurt 'em. Besides, everything had turned out all right. Blue Sleeves's Apaches had behaved just about as Oliver had had it figured.

He knew there would be no more Indian raids on the valley settlements after this morning's debacle.

"That'll be mighty fine, if you bring a replacement over to the rock for me, Lieutenant," the old man grinned. "Vella will be glad to see us. Have a hunch she'll be gladder to see you than she will me."

Lieutenant Brushing slapped the old warrior affectionately on the back. "The reason I'm riding back with you," he said, "is to make sure Vella gets to Bowie. I don't want to lose sight of her ever again."

Owen Oliver grunted. "I wouldn't be thinking of retiring," he admitted, "if I wasn't sure my little girl was provided for. Well, Lieutenant, with your permission, let's be riding. We got a far piece of desert to cover if we're going to make it to the Peak before sundown."

In the next issue

High Country Manhunt

Carr scared off all the valley ranchers—all but one slip of a girl who dared to call his bluff

A Magazine-Length Novel

By FRANK P. CASTLE

Brand of Fury

Framed with the tag of rustler, Raglan had to clear himself—if he could just avoid a noose long enough

Beginning an Exciting Serial

By JACK BARTON

The Silent Years

By J. L. BOUMA

LIGHTING his first cigar of the day, Frank Warren preferred to ignore thinking of John Parks, whose stubborn and unforgiving nature was dampening Ann's wedding day. Voices and occasional snatches of girlish laughter reached him from his daughter's upstairs room. On

HIS DAUGHTER'S wedding day had arrived, but Frank didn't know whether to expect rice or bullets

the surface, this sunny morning was one of bustling gaiety, but underneath stirred worry, doubt, a faint misgiving.

Frank's three sons—age fifteen to eighteen inclusive—pounded down the stairs with shouts of "See you in church, Dad!"

Martha appeared on the landing. "You boys behave yourselves," she admonished, and followed them down. Watching her, she appeared as young and pretty to Frank as she had on their wedding day, and that was twenty years ago.

He smiled. "You look nice. How's Ann doing?"

"All right." Martha came up to him and straightened his string tie. She looked into his eyes. "Well, we're losing her."

There was more worry than regret in

A bride needs something old to wear

her voice, Frank noticed. "Bill will make her a good husband," he said. But it was John, Bill's father, they were both thinking about.

They stepped out on the porch as the buggy rattled past from the barn, the boys crowded on the seat. Martha sighed. "Lord, I hope nothing happens to spoil this day."

She bit her lip, her eyes misty as they met Frank's. He put his hand on her shoulder gently, and it seemed to him they were back in time to another moment such as this, the day of their own marriage.

"It's not very nice for Ann." said Martha. "That stubborn man!"

Their daughter's voice reached them. "Mother! Something old— Where are you?"

"I'll be right up, dear," Martha answered.

"Something old?" Frank asked.

"Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue." Martha smiled. "She has my blue lace handkerchief—the one I had when we married. That takes care of the blue and the borrowed. And she'll wear the little gold watch you gave her for something new. Now we'll have to look for something old."

"You'll find it."

"Yes," she said. She went to the door and looked back. "Frank, do you suppose he'll be there?"

"I hope so, but I doubt it."

"I know," she sighed, and attempted a smile. "Well—" She gave a faint shake of her head and went inside.

FRANK drew on his cigar it didn't taste right, but he continued to worry it with his back teeth. He went down the steps and around the house to the barn. Three or four of his men were idling in the sun that lay warm against the long bunkhouse. Old Sam was polishing the carriage Frank had hired for the occasion. Walking across the yard in his black suit, Frank had a feeling of awkwardness. It was Sunday, his daughter's wedding day, and the strong sense of ownership that was his on working days was missing. This was an important time in his life, the end of something, he thought, and a deep reluctance rose up in him. He wished John were here, and wondered what the man felt at this moment, what his thoughts were, knowing that today his son was marrying the daughter of the man he hated.

Old Sam grinned as Frank came up. "Spit and polish. Ain't she a beauty?"

"Fit for a queen." Frank looked at his reflection in the sparkling window of the carriage, seeing a lanky figure with a shock of dark hair that forty-two years of living had not yet touched with gray. "You'll be there, won't you, Sam?"

"I rocked her cradle and broke her first colt," Sam said. "I'll be there."

Frank tossed his cigar away and wandered back to sit on the front porch. He crossed his boots on the railing and allowed his thoughts to go back to the time he and John Parks had worked for Ladder. Frank had been twenty-one, John five years older —and what ambitions they'd had to work their own cattle! When you were young and eager, you never considered all that could happen to spoil your plans.

"If we pool our wages," John had said, "I figure that in five years we'll have enough for a good start."

But they hadn't stuck it out nearly that long, for Martha had come between them, and their wills had clashed for the first time. John Parks, a grim and bossy man to begin with, considered himself senior partner. He made long range plans and expected Frank to agree. Any arguments angered him.

Martha was the daughter of George Malone, who had a small ranch up at Juniper Creek. John met her there, having ridden out that way one day to look over the country. He brought her to the Saturday night dance, where he introduced her to Frank. "Go ahead and dance with her, kid." He grinned, his hand on her waist in a possessive way. "But mind your manners."

There was a faintly puzzled look behind Martha's smile. Dancing, she said, "So you're the kid John's been telling me about."

Frank had never before minded John calling him kid—it didn't mean anything,

and was just John's way. But as he looked down at Martha's face he felt sullen, argumentative, and finally angry.

"Just don't go judging me from what John says," he told her.

They danced well together, with close awareness. By the time the music stopped, he'd made up his mind. "No work tomorrow," he said. "All right if I come by your place? We could go for a ride."

She hesitated, lowered her eyes, and in the awkward silence he saw John coming toward them. And he heard her saying, "Be there at noon—in time for dinner."

FRANK saw a lot of her after that, a fact of which John wasn't aware. And they weren't the only ones to sit on Malone's front porch. The Malones were new in the country, and there weren't so many pretty girls around that Martha lacked suitors. But John made it pretty plain to one and all that he was head man, and two or three times he made it still plainer by backing what he said with his fists. And the one time his fists failed him, he used his gun to settle the argument.

That was before he got wise to what was going on. One day he showed Frank a heart-shaped locket. "Nice, huh?" he said. "It was my mother's. You think Martha'll like it?"

That should have been the time for Frank to say that he and Martha were falling in love, but he didn't. There was something close to wistfulness in the way John looked at that gold locket, and Frank was reluctant to hurt him.

"She should," he said. He didn't think Martha would accept it, for in that day when a man gave a girl jewelry, it somehow bound her to him.

Sitting on the porch the morning of his daughter's wedding day, Frank remembered with dull pain what had happened after that.

He had quit work at noon on Saturday, and had ridden out to see Martha. They were sitting on the bench under the big cottonwood when John came in the hired buggy, and he looked both puzzled and angry when he saw them together.

"Well, I sure didn't expect to find you here," he said. Then he turned to Martha. "Ready to go?"

"I'm sorry, John," she said. "But Frank came by, and we decided not to go to the dance tonight."

John frowned. "You decided that, did you?" He glanced at Frank. "Leave us alone for a minute, kid."

Frank saw on Martha's face that she wanted him to do as John said, so he wandered over to the corral. Later, he heard the buggy driving away, and he found Martha huddled on the bench, crying.

"He tried to give me a locket," she said, "but I refused it. I told him about us, and he's wild, Frank. I'm afraid—"

He held her until her crying ceased, and both of them knew then that the scene had brought them so close together that there could be but one answer. He asked then and there for her hand, and after their kiss, and a breathless moment of bewilderment, they went in to tell her folks.

When he got back to the ranch, he found John waiting for him in the bunkhouse, and John was fighting drunk. John called him a few choice names, and Frank watched his rage mount to open fury. "You rotten two-timer!" John shouted. "Making up to her behind my back! A lousy punk kid like you!"

That was about all Frank was willing to take. There was no use trying to talk sense to John, so Frank went after him. They fought for a good half-hour, making a shambles of the bunkhouse, before Frank smashed a jarring blow to John's jaw and put him out.

Frank hoped that would end it once and for all, but he was wary, remembering the time John had used his gun. He thought of quitting his job, but that was settled for him next morning when Ladder's owner fired them both.

Frank went to work for Malone after that. Three days later, he heard John was in town and looking for him.

He knew then that it had to come to a showdown. So he rode to town, a gun at his waist, but when he got there he learned John was in jail for shooting up a

saloon. There was nothing to do but head back to the ranch, and hope John would come to his senses by the time they released him. A week later, word reached him that John had bought a ten-cow outfit on the eastern rim of the valley.

He and Martha got married the following month, and he had no trouble remembering that day. For a thin edge of fear was in them both that John might make his move in this last moment. Martha was frightened enough to want to hold the wedding at the house, but Frank insisted on being married in church. He didn't want people thinking he was dodging John.

But John didn't show himself, and almost two months passed before Frank ran into him. It was in town, the first time he'd seen John since the night they fought. Frank went up to him and spoke, but one look at John's grim, closed face was enough to tell him he'd made a mistake. John didn't say a word—he just turned on his heel and stalked away.

THAT was the beginning of the silent years. John prospered. Men said he was a bear for work. He married a girl whose folks had a homestead in the hills, and they started to raise a family. Their first-born, Bill, came into the world a year ahead of Ann.

After Ann was born, Frank and Martha moved to their own place. This was in 1872, when the railroad built a spur to town and the cattle business flourished. The years drifted by, and people were past remembering what had happened between Frank and John. It was general knowledge that they didn't speak, and that was that. And as far as Frank was concerned, John didn't exist.

Then something happened to bring it all back to mind. It was Ann's tenth birthday, and she was having a party. She invited her classmates, including Bill Parks. When Frank picked her up at school the day before the party, she said, "Bill can't come. He said his father won't let him. Why, Dad?"

She was smart for her age and knew something was wrong, but Frank didn't know how to tell her. It angered him that John could pull something so small as to deprive his son of a good time. It was the beginning of a break between their children. Before this, they had not been aware of the silent feud between their fathers, but now they sensed it, and it led to trouble.

Dick, Frank's oldest, fought Bill in the schoolyard, and was soundly whipped. But it didn't end there. They fought every day for a month, to the despair of the teacher who called on both Frank and John for help to stop it. She had no luck, and the fights ranged down to the younger boys. Nothing was ever settled, but since they weren't at all sure what they fought about, that time of trouble finally passed.

Frank wasn't sure when his daughter and Bill Parks became interested in each other. Ann was seventeen when she asked Frank if it was all right for Bill to come for Sunday dinner. "Of course," Frank said. "He's always welcome here."

The boy had a lot of his father in him, Frank noticed when they met—youthful pride that said he was his own man. Frank took to him right away. He wondered what John would say when he learned his son had visited at Frank's house.

The answer was obvious when Bill called again the next day. The boy had a black eye, and he wore a defiant expression. He didn't say what had happened, but Frank knew without being told. Father and son had clashed, and John had lost.

It was obvious that Bill and Ann were falling in love. The boy spent all his spare time with her; they went to parties and dances together. But Ann was never invited to the Parks ranch, and Frank was certain she had never met John until one day she came home in tears.

It came out, finally, that she had seen John in town, and had tried to talk to him. She wouldn't say just what took place, but Frank knew it must've been pretty bad to make her cry. "It's so foolish," she said. "And all because you and he had that trouble almost twenty years ago."

Frank said angrily, "Did he tell you that?"

"Of course not. I guessed a long time ago, and then Bill and I pieced it together. It's so foolish!" she cried. "Like—like children. Why can't you go to him—"

"He made his choice," Frank said. "Anyhow, it has nothing to do with you kids."

"It has everything to do with us," his daughter said. "We're getting married, and it'll be terrible if Bill's father refuses to acknowledge me!"

FRANK guessed it would, so he made up his mind to do something about it. Without telling Ann, or even mentioning it to Martha, he rode over to John's ranch. John and his foreman were at the corral when Frank came up, and John showed him a baleful glare. He said to his foreman, "Tell that man to get the hell off my place." Then he walked into the house.

Stubborn damn fool, Frank thought now. Ann had been right—John had not acknowledged her. Well, at least Bill wouldn't have to depend on his father after today. Frank had set him up with a hundred head of prime stock as a wedding gift. The boy had filed up on the mesa, and had built a small house. They would get along.

"Dad!"

Frank rose at his daughter's voice, and went inside. A little pain started in his chest as he looked at her. She had on her wedding dress, and watched him with a half-anxious, half-smiling expression that asked for his approval.

He took a long breath. "Beautiful," he said in a thick voice. He held her against him for a moment, kissed her on the cheek, then reached out and took Martha's hand. "By golly—" he said.

Judy, Ann's best friend and one of the bridesmaids, said from the window, "Someone's coming—" She broke off then, and turned with a startled expression. "Ann, it's Mr. Parks!"

"Oh, Lord, no," Ann said weakly.

Frank felt his jaw tighten. "I'll meet him outside," he said grimly. "If he wants to see you, he'll ask for you."

"Frank, don't do anything—" Martha began.

"I'll handle this," Frank said flatly.

He went out and closed the door deliberately behind him. John looked up from tying his team, grim-faced, his hard eyes raking Frank's. He said stiffly, "I'm here to call on your daughter."

"Why?"

"That's my business."

They stared at each other for a long moment. Twenty years had passed, the long silence was broken, and memory was like a chasm between them. "You've already dampened my daughter's happiness," Frank said. "If you spoil it for her entirely, I'll kill you."

John's mouth tightened to a thin straight line. An air of tenseness came out of the man, as if he were holding himself in careful check, and temper flared in his hard eyes. "Make up your mind," he said.

Frank looked at him a moment longer, then opened the door and stood to one side. John entered and made a stiff little bow in Martha's direction. Then he looked at Ann and his tight mouth relaxed.

"I've been thinking it over—" he began, and broke off to clear his throat. And Frank realized suddenly what it must have cost him to come here at all.

John reached into his pocket and stepped up to Ann. "I'm late giving you this," he said, "but it would pleasure me to have you wear it today. It's something old—a locket that was my mother's."

He paused, looking into her eyes, and Frank saw his daughter's mouth tremble. She said, "It will please me to wear it."

THE LOCKET Martha had refused, Frank thought, his throat thick. He glanced at his wife and saw she was close to tears, her hands clasped tight together as she watched John pin the locket to Ann's dress. Then John leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, and suddenly she clung to him and started to cry.

He patted her shoulder clumsily, saying, "It's sometimes a good idea to get rid of what's old." He looked at Martha, then at Frank, who understood that John meant more than what he'd said. He was not apologizing for the years of silence, nor was it in him to do so. "Now I have a

daughter," he said, and glanced down at the locket. Then he looked again at Frank with a thin smile, and it seemed to Frank that a little gleam of triumph danced in his eyes.

It was there and gone. He stepped back and inclined his head stiffly toward Martha. "My wife and I would be pleased to have you and your husband stop by the house after the reception."

"The pleasure will be ours," Martha said. Then she took a step forward, her hand out, her smile tremulous. "Oh, John, it was good of you to come!"

"I'm glad I came," he said, taking her hand in both of his, and smiling at her. "It will be a fine wedding."

He turned to shake hands with Frank. "We will expect you for supper," he said.

Frank laughed, a huge relief welling up in him, washing him clean of worry, of misgiving. "We'll be there," he said. "By golly, we'll be there with bells on."

They all went outside with John and watched him climb into his buggy. "John," said Martha, "you thank your wife for giving us a wonderful son-in-law."

"She knows it, but I'll tell her what you said," John said, and grinned. He picked up the reins, and lifted a hand as he drove out of the yard.

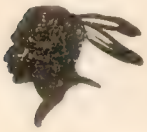
"Oh, I'm so happy," Ann breathed. "I love everyone."

"I guess we all feel the same way," Frank said, laughing again. He touched the locket with the tip of his finger. "For sheer stubbornness that new father of yours is hard to beat." He met Martha's eyes and winked, and for a moment they shared their secret. "You'll have to tell her about it," he said to his wife. Then, grinning widely, he went out to help old Sam hitch up.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Every New Mexico cowboy knows the wind can blow from any direction, and often does, but from what direction are the *prevailing* winds in New Mexico?

2. Texans may brag and Texans may blow, but here's one from Texas I'll bet you don't know: which is the Lone Star's official state bird — magpie, mockingbird or chaparral cock?



3. Complete these two-part names of Western Indian tribes: Nez ——, Gros ——, Black——, Mescalero ——, Hunk——.

4. In cowboy slanguage, what is the difference between peeling a cow and peeling a bronc?

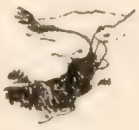
5. True or false: adult cougars or mountain lions often weigh around 500 pounds.

6. The site of the famous Mountain Meadow Massacre of pioneer days is located in the Dixie National Forest in what Western, not Southern state?

7. Carson City, capital of Nevada, is near what famous scenic lake that lies across the boundary between what two states?

8. What is the dutch oven, commonly used in chuckwagon cooking?

9. In what Southwestern state is Spanish the native language of almost as many people as English?



10. In the Southwest you find many place names like Arroyo Hondo, Arroyo Seco, Arroyo Largo, etc. How do you pronounce *arroyo* and what does it mean?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 129. **Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

"you're not fit to be a mother!"

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"I'd sure like to know your name," he said

ONE NIGHT IN

BOB NEVER MET a cardsharp as slick as Lucy. And Lucy never met a man as fast with a gun . . . or a kiss . . . as Bob

LARAMIE

By FRANK P. CASTLE

THE LONG TRAIN of cattle cars was loaded at last, at the culmination of a day of heat, dust, grueling work. By a small fire beyond the pens where a coffee pot bubbled, Bob Terrill rapped a mouth organ against his knee and settled himself for a soul-satisfying rendition of "Aurora Lee," with runs and trills. Standing nearby, Purse Frith, range boss of the T and T, made a sour face.

"Two things I can't abide," he growled. "A man who insists on warbling when he can't, and the noises you make with that thing. Sounds like a cat having its tail cut off, an inch at a time."

Terrill grinned at him. "Trouble with you, Purse, you just got no appreciation for the finer things—"

Somebody coming at a hurried trot along the embankment above interrupted him: "Hey, Frith! Jim Oliphant just fell off a fence and busted his leg!"

Frith went up the embankment, blazing the purple dusk with profanity. Terrill shook his head. "Mighty embarrassing for old Jim, after all the broncs that never shook him loose." He reluctantly put away his mouth organ, and followed along.

Some minutes later, with the train's whistle hooting impatiently and Oliphant loudly declaring he hadn't fallen, somebody had pushed him, Frith took Bob Terrill's arm and pulled him to one side. Asa Glendon, the T and T's business manager, was there, too. They both looked at Terrill with pessimistic expressions.

"No other way out; I'm too busy, and so's Asa," Frith growled. "You got to ride with this shipment to Laramie, and make delivery to Sam Loverich."

Terrill grinned, delighted. "Say, that's great! Haven't been to Laramie for a year—"

"And I remember what happened when you were there!" Frith said. "Nobody ever caused me so much trouble! You deliver those cattle and come straight home!"

"No fooling around with the draft Loverich gives you!" Asa Glendon said. "Send it right to me, registered mail! You hear?"

"Bet they can hear you clear out at the ranch," Terrill chuckled. "Wish I had my warbag, but I'll buy me a clean shirt in town. Asa, how about a couple of dollars for expenses?"

Glendon reluctantly thumbed some bills from a roll. Frith's voice, with a despairing note in it, followed Terrill back toward the caboose, "Don't you play cards with nobody!"

Terrill shook his head, swinging aboard. Mighty edgy people, those two; you'd think he wasn't of age, and still needed a nursemaid.

A brakeman in the caboose looked him over. The train's conductor was there, too. The brakie moistened his lips and winked at the conductor. "Howdy, puncher! Hey, guess you got paid off, like all those others, huh? It's going to be a long night; how about a little poker, just to pass the time? Low stakes—"

Terrill looked at him—a guileless look. It was all he had to do. With his smooth, unlined checks and friendly demeanor, he wasn't capable of any other kind.

"Well, now, I've got two or three bucks," he said. "Better warn you fellows, though—I'm kind of a shark when it comes to poker. Yes, sir, win so frequent you just wouldn't believe it!"

The conductor snorted. The cards were dealt even before the wheels started turning. The conductor won the first pot, the brakeman won the second. The conductor won the third. "Guess you left your luck behind, cowpoke," the conductor observed. "Suppose we up the stakes? Then you'll have a better chance to get your money back."

Terrill scratched his head. "Might be you're right. I never saw anything like this—nearly always win. How high you figure the stakes ought to go?"

THE TRAIN arrived in the Laramie yards at noon. Bob Terrill took the pot regretfully. "I warned you fellows!" He assembled a fairly fat wad of bills, every cent the train crew possessed; even the engineer and fireman had emptied their pockets in an effort to stem the tide. He went to the rear door, appreciatively eyeing the town as it appeared. "Tell you something—maybe it'll help, next time you try skinning a puncher: you had those cards crimped mighty obvious. I had every high one from jack to ace spotted by the fifth time around."

Then he dropped off and went whistling across the yards.

Several hours later, after having said howdy here and there, he walked into the office of Sam Loverich, buyer for a big Chicago packing house. Loverich grinned, handing over the draft for the cattle shipment. "I started warning everybody to put up their storm shutters, soon as I heard you were in town!"

"Now, Sam," Terrill said, embarrassed, "you know I've been in only two ruckuses in Laramie."

"And how many in other places—all of them historic dust-ups by now? I'd like to follow you around, Bob, waiting to see what'll happen this time, but I'm getting along and my heart won't stand excitement so good any more." Then Loverich turned serious. "Fooling aside, son, you be careful. Len Diamond moved in here a month ago."

"Ah?" Terrill said. "Well, I got tired of him some time ago—guess I can stay out of his way."

"Question is, will he stay out of yours? After the times I've heard about when you two locked horns, him always losing his hide, and knowing Diamond, I've got a notion he'd do about anything to get back at you."

"Rest easy, Sam," Terrill said. "I've got no reason to go near that crook. . . ."

The Stockman's House was Laramie's best hotel. Terrill entered it, somewhat later, with assorted packages under his arm. He was thinking about the unreasonable jumpiness of people when he was around—had stopped at Ben Cooney's Crystal Saloon for a sociable drink, and Cooney, while very glad to see him, had warned that his back-of-the-house games were closed while Terrill was in town.

"It cost me a hundred dollars in smashed glassware the last time you were here, boy. Sure, you paid—but I got to think about my nerves!"

Halfway across the lobby, Terrill stopped dead, wheeled to his right, and marched to the cigar counter.

A GIRL stood behind it. She was blonde, with the loveliest complexion and most vivid blue eyes he had ever seen. Somewhat small, with an excitingly rounded body. Bob Terrill's heart began to hammer, and he found it a little hard to breathe.

She was leaning on a glass case, arms crossed, a remote, bitter look shadowing her pretty features; she became aware of Terrill, and her nose wrinkled as she considered him. Well—range gear, and he hadn't yet beaten the dust out of his levis. He certainly wasn't prepossessing.

"You want something, puncher?"

"Why, yes." He stacked his packages on the case. "Guess I do. I'm Bob Terrill. Who're you?"

The girl frowned. "I sell cigars here—or roll dice, if you're a mind to buck them, double or nothing. I've some smokes at a nickel; you want to risk a roll, go ahead—if you've got a nickel."

He grinned. "I've got a nickel. But I don't smoke cigars, and wouldn't know what to do with them after I won them. No, I've got something else in mind. And if you'll listen a minute—"

She made an angry, impatient sound and spun a pair of dice across the counter. "Stick your nickel on the glass and I'll take it; then go bother somebody else!"

Terrill picked up the dice and tested them with his fingers. "Guess this is one of Len Diamond's layouts. And you must be good, because these dice feel straight. Let's see, now—"

Terrill flipped the dice, with a casual twist of his wrist. They showed seven. He picked them up, hit seven again. And once more. Then the girl snatched at the cubes. Her face was pale, her lips tight.

"All right—so you can pad-roll!" she snapped. "Now, get out of here, before I call for the lookout—"

"I busted a jaw on a Diamond lookout once," Terrill said. "Might be this is the same fellow. . . Now, look. I'd sure like to know your name. I can find out quick enough, asking around, but I'd rather hear it from you."

She chewed her lip uncertainly. The lobby was quiet, at this hour; Len Diamond's lookout, posted to keep an eye on this dice setup the girl ran, was evidently not around. A tall, gray-haired man entered from the street and paused, with a frowning glance.

"I'm Lucy Kinnick," she said, at last. "And I've got trouble enough without having a saddlebum pester me!"

"Guessed you were in trouble of some kind," Terrill said, reaching for her hand and holding it gently. "Stop worrying about it. I'm pretty good at mending troubles. Lucy, I'm kind of abrupt, some ways. Can't help it. Way I figure, life's awful short, and you miss a lot of fun if you waste time beating around the bush. I see you don't have any rings on your fingers. Hope you're not bespoken, but I'll risk that. Like I said, I'm Bob Terrill, and I own the T and T—fifty thousand acres of the best grass in Wyoming. That is, I'll own it next month, when I'm twenty-five, according to my pa's will. And twenty-five is mighty old, some ways. I figure I ought to be married. Trouble is, I never met a girl I much wanted to marry. Until now."

Lucy Kinnick jerked her hand away from him and looked frantically around. The gray-haired man came across the lobby. He was Jason Cordele, marshal of Laramie.

"This man is crazy!" Lucy told him. "He claims he owns a big ranch, and is asking me to m-marry him!"

"Well, he's crazy, all right—like a denful of foxes," Cordele said. "He owns the ranch. And if he's just asking you to marry him, don't worry—time for that is when he says he's going to. Bob, why don't you go away before something happens, like it always does, and this girl's cigar case gets kicked to pieces."

"Well, all right, Jase," Terrill reluctantly agreed. "Have to clean up and put on my new duds, anyway." He captured the girl's hand again. "I've got to head home some time tomorrow—would you rather have the wedding in the morning, or the afternoon?"

"G-get out of here!" Lucy Kinnick cried.

Diamond's lookout came from the hotel bar, scowled and moved hurriedly forward. "Anything wrong?" he demanded of the girl. Then he saw Terrill and took a hasty backward step.

"Nothing wrong," Terrill said. "And it looks like your jaw healed right good; don't go getting it busted again." He gave Lucy a parting smile. "You be thinking about where we'll spend our honeymoon. Me, I'm in favor of San Francisco. . . ."

CORDELE came, an hour later, into the room of Bob Terrill, who was studying himself in a mirror—pearl-gray coat, whipcord breeches cuffed over pointed-toe boots. "Thought you'd be along soon, Jase. How do you like my new clothes?"

"Mighty fancy," Cordele said.

"Donated by some railroad friends of mine," Terrill said. "Hope you're not going to ask me to head home tonight?"

"No—though the Overland goes through at nine, and I'd be happier if I knew you were on it . . . She's a girl carrying a big load of trouble, Bob; don't make it worse."

"I mean to hand her the T and T and everything it can buy," Terrill said, quietly. "I wasn't talking a bit wild, Jase. What kind of trouble?"

"A brother with sick lungs, in a shack across the tracks," Cordele said. "She was taking him to the coast, and went broke here. Diamond had just moved in." The marshal's mouth twisted bitterly. "Like you, I despise the son, but my authority goes just so far, and there are powerful people in this town who take a cut from the profits he rakes in with his crooked cards and dice; I have to stand by and let him operate. Diamond gave her a job; somewhere, somehow, she learned more skill than any man I've ever known. Afternoons, she works that cigar counter. Nights, she deals at Diamond's new Grand Union, on First Street—blackjack and poker. And Diamond isn't interested in her just because she adds a sizeable stack to his take every day, either."

Terrill remembered nights at poker tables when Len Diamond was operating in Cheyenne; the other had always come out second-best. "Sure wanted to stay out of his way, this trip. Guess I can't, though."

"Lucy's held him at arm's-length so far, but her resistance is beginning to wear sort of thin," Cordele said. Then he started. "You damned well are going to stay out of his way!"

"Listen, Jase," Terrill interrupted, "I wonder whether the Overland will be on time. . . ."

Bob Terrill watched the varnished, gas-lighted coaches roll past as the Overland picked up speed, leaving Laramie. Then he headed across the tracks toward the glitter and noise of First Street.

The Grand Union was a big, garish place, with not much of a crowd yet. Lucy Kinnick sat at a table back in a far corner, sifting cards between supple fingers. She wore a low-cut dress that revealed nicely-rounded shoulders, but Terrill noted bluish hollows under her collarbones as he sat down. Trying to tend a sick boy and also earn a living at this tough trade—and keeping Diamond in his place, too—had been hard on her.

"Hope I look better now," Terrill said, trying a smile.

Her startled look told him he did, and that she was pleasantly surprised. She said, "I deal blackjack here. If you want to play, go ahead. If not, you can't linger."

Terrill dug into a coat pocket and brought out a handful of rings—solitaires. He arranged them on the table. "Got these at the Plains Mercantile. Hope there's one you'll like."

A tired frown ridged her forehead. "Look, I asked around about you, after our meeting this afternoon. I learned you're a man of fantastic luck—"

"Not at all. Skill."

"Both, then. Also, that you're one of the wealthiest men in Wyoming. That means a position to fill, an important place in the state's society. Even if—if you mean the things you said to me, you simply can't afford to have your name linked with a girl who deals cards in a saloon—"

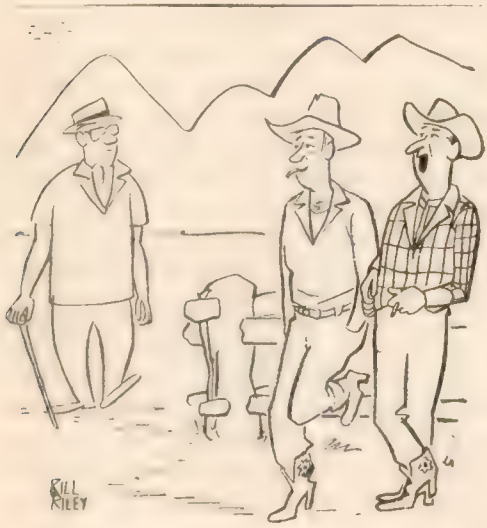
"My mother was dancing in a saloon at Julesburg when my father met her," Terrill said. "She was the finest woman I

ever knew—taught me how to size people up, something she learned well during the years she had to fend for herself. That's why I know it isn't any mistake, the way I feel about you." He grinned. "My pa would say I'm a danged slow-poke; he married her the same day they met!"

Lucy's lips trembled. Her head bent and the cards flew through her fingers. Terrill sighed and put the rings back in his pocket.

"Guess I'll play some blackjack," he said.

TERRILL saw an exhibition of real card-handling, then. Lucy Kinnick combined rare skill with a sharp mental agility. It quickly became apparent that she was remembering every card, in



"He's resting up from signing too many dotted lines."

sequence, that went into the turning deck. It was an accomplishment Terrill admired, for he was doing it, too, and knew this was no easy feat. The deck was honest, with no markings on the ten-cards, and she was dealing exactly as they came, without dipping into the deck or reaching for the bottom. He had a feeling that those swift, sure hands knew how to, though.

Once she spoke, quietly: "My father had his own gambling house on Prairie Avenue, in Chicago—a straight, square place. He taught me all I know. A disgruntled loser shot him in the back five years ago, when I was seventeen. . ."

Terrill felt pleased at having her confide that voluntarily. He said, "Been a tough row for you to hoe, since?"

"Yes. I have a brother, nineteen, who is sickly. The care he needs is expensive. And this is the only way I know to earn what he must have."

A glance from her blue eyes told him a lot more than her words. Weariness was in it. Taking care of her brother had worn Lucy to the breaking point.

He had a notion someone else—Len Diamond—had noticed this too. Likely Diamond had deliberately applied pressure to increase her weariness. Terrill wished he could tell her she needn't worry any longer, but had the feeling he had said enough for a while. Time was needed now for her to think about him.

The garish new saloon had been filling up—a place, Terrill thought, probably furrowing the brows of Ben Cooney and the other honest bar-owners of Laramie, for Diamond operated only tinseled boob-traps. He cheated a town broke, then moved on.

Len Diamond himself appeared.

He was a big man, somewhat paunchy but powerfully built; a couple of hours every day in a barber chair kept him looking superficially young.

He nodded coldly to Terrill, while speaking to Lucy: "Game of draw starting in the back room. You're wanted."

Lucy nodded, starting to gather the cards. Then her hands were still. Some signal had passed between the big man and herself. Looking at Terrill, she said, speaking with difficulty: "Perhaps you—would like to sit in?"

"Private game," Diamond growled. "I'll issue the invitations."

"Issue one, then," Terrill said. He felt a little impatient. Both the hook and the bait were obvious; Diamond hated his guts, and would give anything to get him in a game again and scrape him down to bare bones. This was a rigged game coming up, himself picked for fleecing. He had

hoped to avoid it and knew now he could not, for he must stay with Lucy Kinnick tonight until she made up her mind about him.

"All right; come along," Diamond said, then maneuvered to get ahead of Terrill, with the girl. Diamond murmured something to her, going into a back room at the end of the bar. Her face was pale, her mouth pinched as she went to a corner stand to break open a new deck of cards and shuffle them, returning to a big round table where a sizeable lamp burned in the center. She pushed the lamp to one side.

Meanwhile, Terrill had been jostled, bumped and pawed by others—three of them, obviously Diamond's men—also squeezing through the door. They were searching for a possible gun on him. Ordinarily, he didn't pack an iron. Tonight he carried one—and they didn't find it.

It looked as if Len Diamond wasn't going to waste much time in this effort to recoup his past losses to Bob Terrill—and, Terrill thought, the girl would be involved, likely as much to drive himself and her apart as to help in the fleecing.

A WAITER brought in some drinks, and they started to play. Terrill won a small pot on the third hand and said, raking it in, "Hard to keep track of your limit. Suppose we take the lid off?"

Lucy bit her lip. Diamond's eyes glinted with satisfaction. This fool, he must be thinking, was making it easy for him. "Sure!"

"I'll need a little more cash," Terrill said. "My IOU good?"

Diamond nodded. Terrill wrote an IOU for a thousand, and Diamond thumbed bills from a stuffed wallet. They settled to play poker. And, Terrill thought, with the lid off, whatever was going to happen here would happen that much quicker. Which was all right with him. . . .

At the end of another hour he was down about five thousand, and Diamond had two more of his IOU's.

Diamond was making Lucy skin him. On every hand where he stayed, the others dropped and left him to fight it out with her. He won small pots on good hands; he lost big pots on better ones. And, though he watched everything, he couldn't catch a wrong move. Still, they were being made. He was losing those pots on rigged hands—and Lucy was rigging them.

That waiter came in again as he was writing another IOU. The room was becoming smoke-filled. Lucy lifted a silk handkerchief from the bosom of her dress and flicked it, spreading a scent of lilacs. "Len, will you open a window, please?"

Diamond nodded, getting up, conferring a moment with the waiter. Lucy dealt. Terrill assembled his hand and tipped back the corners of the cards for a swift look. Then he laid them face-down, his fingertips light against the back of the top card for a moment.

He held a pat full house, kings over aces, but he wasn't thinking of this—but of the fact that another deck had just been switched into the game. These high cards were strippers, shaved down the sides so sensitive fingers could find and slide them out of a deck.

Lucy's work? How she might have made the switch, wearing that low-cut dress, he couldn't guess.

Diamond came back and sat down. Lucy opened, and the betting went high before the draw. Terrill stayed in, discarding the two aces. Lucy sent him a wooden glance, and two cards—off the top; he would have sworn to it. She took three. The others grumbled and dropped out.

Terrill looked at what she had handed him. He had the fourth king, and the spade ace.

"Bet a thousand," Lucy said.

Terrill shrugged and sifted those four kings into the discard. "Just can't seem to hit tonight," he said.

Lucy started, going pale. Diamond said suspiciously, "Hey, what are you holding?" and jerked the cards from her. That was a breach of poker ethics. Terrill frowned; then he stared incredulously at a pair of jacks, deuce, five, and nine.

"A bust—and she backed you out!" Diamond chortled.

Terrill knew he had been wrong, then. Lucy had set up that hand for him to win, not lose.

Diamond was pushing a big drift of paper money toward the girl. Terrill said, "I want five thousand more, Diamond."

"Hand her your marker and take it," the men said. "Terrill, this is one time you're not going to walk out winner!"

It looked as if he was right. Presently Terrill found himself down about fifteen thousand. He thought wryly of what Purse Frith and Asa Glendon would say if he didn't regain that money.

The stripper deck had disappeared after the one round. Now Diamond dealt, and nobody opened. The waiter appeared again, to serve him deferentially; Diamond, gathering the cards, shuffled and cut them, then swore suddenly at the waiter and shoved him back with a sweep of his arm; he mopped his brow with a sleeve, and passed the deck to Lucy. "They're ready; spin them. After this round, I'll open another window."

IT WAS all done swiftly, before Terrill could object. Lucy dealt, and opened. This time the others quit, as before, but Diamond stayed, with Terrill and the girl. Terrill had four cards toward a medium straight, open at both ends, took one, and filled at the top with a ten. Diamond sleeved his face again, and stood pat. Lucy considered, dealt herself two—and blundered.

It was incredible. Everybody at the table saw it—the clumsy shift of her hands, fingers fumbling awkwardly; it seemed she was reaching at least three deep for a card she wanted, and making an amateurish botch of the try.

Small spots of color showed in her cheeks. She dropped the card she had so ineptly grabbed and lowered her eyes.

"Damn you!" Diamond said to her in volcanic fury.

"She's out of the hand," Terrill said. "I'm not. These cards look good—for about ten thousand."

Lucy's eyes were frantic. Diamond laughed aloud, in triumph. "Called!"

Terrill showed his straight. Diamond laughed again, displaying four aces and a five. "Write me another IOU, sucker!"

"Not tonight," Terrill said. "Guessed you'd try it with something high when you did come in yourself for a real killing, Diamond—especially after you took your turn at switching decks, covering with that face mopping while you ran in one slipped you by the waiter, stacked to give me a hand fat enough to make sure I'd ride along. But you didn't trust it to get your aces, so you scrubbed your face again and handed yourself a fistful in place of the cards Lucy dealt you. She also saw you do it, and tried to foul the hand—"

"You're a liar!" Diamond yelled.

"Nope. Had a hunch you'd try for the big killing with aces, so I held one out, a few hands back—" Terrill's hand flicked, and out of his sleeve came the spade ace he had withheld when discarding those four kings.

A moment of deep silence—then Diamond's chair went back and his coat flew open as he reached for a gun.

Terrill had shoved his chair hard, also; he bent and lifted the Colt he had shoved into a boot-top, under the cuff of his new trousers. Diamond got in the first shot, a miss so near Terrill thought the bullet's markings must have rubbed off on his face. He slugged lead into the man's leg. Diamond hit the floor, screaming.

Then those other three came at Bob Terrill. He put the gun butt into one's teeth, ducked a chair that crashed against a wall, failed to duck a fist that rocked him back on his heels, used his pistol barrel this time to down the fellow who had swung it. The third was circling, trying to get behind him.

Lucy Kinnick, who had been doing something hurriedly at the table, ran at this third one, head down, and butted him. The man yelled, flailing at her; there was a sound of tearing cloth, and Lucy reeled aside. Terrill fired again; the man pitched into the table, knocking it over with a crash.

Terrill went around the table, and caught Lucy up in his arms. "Out the window—

quick!" He shoved her bodily through it.

A bartender came crashing through the door from the saloon, swinging a short billiard cue. The table lamp had broken, and flame was licking at spilled oil. The bartender threw the cue; it struck Terrill's arm, a painful blow that made him drop the gun. The bartender came on at a rush, shoulders hunched, arms swinging.

Terrill drew a deep breath and used boots, knees and one clubbing fist on the bartender, fast as a man could move. He turned toward Diamond, then, and the man threw a wild shot at him. Terrill went reluctantly through the window.

LUCY WAS WAITING, her face a pale blur in the darkness, hugging herself—maybe because of the torn dress. Terrill paused; the window was a mass of red, but maybe that fire could be put out. A bullet smashed glass over his head, and Lucy grabbed at his arm. "Come on!" she cried.

They ran into the railroad yards. She said breathlessly, "You're—wonderful! At fighting, I mean!"

"I always try to keep the peace; people just won't let me—"

She sniffed at this, then said, "You idiot! After all the trouble I took to give you those four kings, so you could get even, you threw them away!"

"Didn't understand until later what you were doing. Sure glad I didn't play them; you were crazy to take such a chance!"

"Don't call me crazy! You bet ten thousand Diamond would hold aces!"

"Yeah," he agreed, soberly thoughtful about that. "Sure glad it didn't misfire, so I'd have had to pay! Lost enough as it was, I'm afraid—"

"I managed to cut your losses a lot," Lucy said. "I grabbed all the paper I could, when the fight started, and shoved it into the front of my dress. That's what I'm hanging onto."

She was, Bob Terrill decided in some awe, incredibly wonderful. "Say, that's where the first switched deck came from, when you were waving that hankerchief!"

"Yes—and shall we change the subject?" Lucy said. They were hurrying along the line of freight cars. Ahead, an engine hooted. "I'm guessing you mean to ride this freight out of town. Take the money, and—good-by."

She stopped, and so did Terrill. A shadow had loomed ahead of them. They heard a chuckle. "Boy, this time you really played hell!" Jason Cordele said.

A smudge of red showed against the night sky. A fire bell was ringing wildly.

"Jase, I swear that for once it wasn't my fault—" Terrill began.

"I don't hear you," Cordele said. "I'm not even seeing you, though I ran this way fast, figuring it was where you'd head. I—ah—think Diamond's going to be burned right out of Laramie. That's going to rile some of our important citizens, who'll be sore at me for not slinging you in jail. Get on this freight before I have to—and don't come back soon!"

"Thanks, Jase!" Terrill picked the girl up again in his arms and started off.

"Ben Cooney and some of the others, including me, will send along a wedding present!" Cordele called.

Lucy was struggling, kicking wildly. "Put me down! I—I can't go with you; I must return to my brother!"

"I helped him on the Overland at nine; he's bound for California. We'll find a good sanitarium for him there when we're on our honeymoon," Terrill said.

Then he lifted her into the box-car, and climbed in after her. The train began to move. Lucy was silent. Bob Terrill tentatively kissed her. It was very nice.

"All right; I'll marry you," Lucy said. "But on one condition—that you never play cards again! And neither will I!"

"Not even casino, long evenings when there's nothing else to do?" he murmured.

"I d-don't think there'll be any evenings like that, for quite a while," Lucy said.

Come to think of it, he decided, she was absolutely right. His evenings were going to be mighty full, beginning with this one. Bob Terrill held her tighter, and kissed her in earnest.

"It's not pretty," she said, "and I hate it!"

TOUGH TOWN

By Alice MacDonald

SOMETIMES it rattled right out of her head—spelling lessons, McGuffey's Reader, and time to ring the bell after recess—when Mady Sims looked out the schoolroom window at Feeding Hills. It was empty and forlorn as discarded slippers, dust hanging heavy over the town's single street and over the sleazy row of buildings. Hungry Hills would be a better name for the town, she thought bitterly—hungry as a mountain lion with its teeth bared.

And inside, the walls were peeling. Mr. Tulley, who was chairman of the school board, had promised to repair the school-

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HOW COULD MADY confess her fear to the man who said he loved her?

house, and had gotten as far as the paint. But when the roof leaked, the walls drooled moisture, and after that the paint had peeled.

Tommy Anders came to the doorway and grinned through his freckles. Just for a moment, Mady's heart skipped along faster, because Tommy had a big brother named Lew who grinned the same way. But then Tommy said, "Ma'am, there's a snake in the yard."

Oh, dear, Mady thought, running her hand through her auburn hair. Scorpions, centipedes half as long as your arm, and now snakes—and they had the nerve to ask her to stay another year! But she wouldn't stay, not even for Lew Anders, she told herself firmly. One year in Arizona Territory was a lifetime—a harrowing, nightmare lifetime. Mady tried to think what Lew had said to do about snakes.

Then she remembered the grizzly the boys had told her was in the hackberry bushes down by the creek, and how she had called out the sheriff and all the men she could find. How it turned out to be a bear rug draped over a sawhorse, and Lew said grimly that the former teacher's paddle Mady had burned the first day had had its use.

"Tommy," she said sternly. "If there isn't any snake, if there really isn't any . . ."

"Oh, yes, ma'am," Tommy said, his blue eyes wide and serious. "There really was a snake. Honest. But I throwed a stone at it, and it crawled off."

Mady swallowed a shudder and got up from her desk. "Threw, Tommy," she said distractedly, looking over Tommy's shoulder at the children playing stick ball in the bare, dusty yard. Fifteen children, and each of them a different problem. There was Jimmy Hawkes, the sheriff's boy, too tall for his age, and almost more than she could handle. Just the other day she had to take a slingshot from him; and the week before it had been a knife large enough to butcher a cow.

And little Sal McHugh, thin and wistful in one of her big sister's made-over dresses. What chance did children have in a place like this? Heaven help them, Mady thought—but with a twinge of guilt, because she had started out last fall wanting to do so much, and she hadn't done it. All the will had leaked out of her under the steady pounding of the sun that was too bright, the wind too sharp, and the land too big and empty.

"There he goes!" Jimmy Hawkes yelled in that voice that started out surprisingly like a man's and ended half an octave higher. The stick bat thumped in the dust, and Jimmy ran to the fence to see Clance Tulley ride by on the bay stallion he exercised every morning. The other children rushed shrieking after him.

Tommy Anders scowled and didn't move from the step. "Aw, he isn't so much." Tommy worshipped his older brother, and regarded Mady as his and Lew's property. He clenched his fists when Clance smiled and tipped his black hat to Mady. Clance, the school-board chairman's son, and home for the first time in years, had been doing that every morning for weeks. "Just because his old man runs the town, he don't need to think he can—"

"Doesn't," Mady corrected gently.

"Anyway, Lew will cut him down to size. You wait and see," Tommy grumbled. "Just like he would of got that rattlesnake." Tommy drew an imaginary gun in the deadly cross-draw.

Mady had to smile, while she asked herself what there was about a big man with blue eyes that made her feel as if moths were fluttering inside her. She remembered how Lew had looked the day she told him she was leaving at the end of the term.

SHE AND LEW had been riding over the big, empty land, so big it made her shudder right down to her bones. And because she was scared, she set her lips a little tighter, and told herself only a fool would have come all the way out here from Boston for her first teaching job. A fool, even though there had been nothing left for her in Boston after her aunt had died, leaving Mady just enough money for her train fare to Feeding Hills.

Lew said, "It's pretty, isn't it?" And Mady thought how strange it was that a man as tough and weather-hardened as Lew could still see beauty in the landscape. She looked at the fiercely jutting eyebrows, the bleak line of his lips. Nothing gentle there, except for the time he had kissed her not so long ago. Maybe you had to be tough or go under in country like this, Mady decided with an inward cringing.

"Pretty enough to build a ranch right there," Lew went on, pointing at the shimmery ribbon of river below them, with the sandstone cliffs glinting red in the sun. His eyes had a faraway look, the wind riffled his dark hair, and Mady got the moth-flutter worse than she had ever had before.

She bit her lip. Sometimes it did look almost pretty, but then she remembered the dust and the searing heat, and the awful lonely miles from one empty place to another. She remembered winter with the strong, cold wind, and having to chink the cracks with rags, before Lew had made the schoolroom tight against the wind.

What would Lew think of her if he knew how scared she was—Lew, who couldn't stomach weakness in anyone. The tears started way back, and she blurted, "It isn't pretty. It isn't pretty at all. And I—I hate it!"

For a moment, Lew's face was so open and blank it hurt her to look. Then he reached over and pulled up her horse and helped her down.

"You don't really mean that, do you, Mady?" His hands bent back her shoulders and held her until her heart squeezed up. But all she could do was nod her head.

"I hate it, Lew. I just hate it."

Lew said softly, "I meant it, too, Mady. About the ranch. I've already made a down payment. I thought you and I—"

She put her hand over his lips, feeling the breath come a little faster under her fingers. "I couldn't do it, Lew. I couldn't stand living here."

She waited for Lew to say he would give up ranching, that he would live wherever she would be happy, but he didn't say it. They had gone to dances all winter, and riding on Sundays, and she had known from the beginning how it was with them. She loved the big lug, toughness and all, and he loved her. He just didn't know how to say what she knew he meant to. And because he didn't, she said it for him. "You don't have to stay here, Lew," and could have bitten her tongue a moment later.

Lew let his hands drop. He looked down at her, almost amused. Then his eyes turned smokily blue. "Be sensible, Mady," he said roughly. "What would I do any place else? All I know is ranching."

Oh, how could she have said it! Lew wouldn't understand how anyone would want gentle, fine things, anything beyond the hard necessities of living. She felt the anger flood through her, hot and hurting. She was mad at Lew, but madder at herself.

"All right, Lew Anders! If that's all you care for me. Anybody who would stay in a place like this ought to have his head examined. And you must think I'm crazier than you are if you think I would. Even if you were the last man—"

She couldn't tell him her real reason for hating Feeding Hills—that the town frightened her.

There had been a lot more, and it had ended by Mady saying she would go to the dance Saturday night with Clance Tulley, who had been asking her for weeks. Lew had stormed at that, and given her warnings about Clance that Mady didn't know whether or not to believe.

But she had gone, and danced all evening with Clance, while Lew stood glowering in the corner.

Anyone, anyone at all was better than Lew Anders, although there was something in Clance's eyes, hungry and questing, that worried her so much she almost let Lew take her home when he came and asked her.

That was when she told Lew she would be leaving the next week, and when that big, dumb cowpoke got a look on his face that made him seem the same age as Tommy, standing there in the doorway with a rock in his grimy fist.

"IT HAD twelve rattles on its tail," Tommy said. "I counted 'em."

"Oh," Mady said, and knew she should have sent one of the children long ago to ring the bell for the end of recess.

"And I almost got it, too. And if I had, I'd've cut off the rattles and wore 'em around my neck, like the Indians do."

She really ought to speak to Tommy about telling fibs, but she was hot, and she knew the dust was streaking her face again. She went over to the bucket in the corner of the schoolroom and dipped water into the basin and washed her face. Not even a pump in the schoolroom! "Come here and wash your hands, Tommy," she said.

. . .

The children were eating lunch under the cottonwood trees, and Mady was sitting on the bench Lew had built, when Clance Tulley came by again. He hitched the stallion to the gate post, his glance reaching out over the heads of the clustered children to Mady.

Why does he seem so different from all the others? Mady asked herself. Not only from the men in Boston, but also from anyone else in Feeding Hills. It wasn't the divided skirts of the Prince Albert, kept sleek and brushed, but the way he wore the coat, and the black hat tilted over one blue eye. Lew's eyes were blue, too, but they weren't cold, like Clance's, they didn't look at you as if they saw right down inside your skin.

She smiled at Clance, her very best smile. Clance had been away to school; somehow, some way he had made money, she had heard; Clance had manners and charm. Only . . . Lew! She'd show him. She could see Tommy sulking by the schoolroom door, and she knew he would tell Lew about this.

Clance's white teeth flashed against his dark face. His hand flipped the brim of the black hat. He reached into his pocket and tossed a coin in the air. "What would you do for this?" he asked Jimmy Hawkes.

"Oh, no—" Mady began, getting to her feet, but Clance's smile was so disarming she stopped.

Jimmy said, "Gosh! I'll bet you've got plenty of that." He reached out eagerly.

Clance laughed and emptied the contents of his pocket into his hand and began passing out coins.

"An' I'll bet you're faster than anybody with your gun," Jimmy said. "I'll bet you can even beat Lew Anders with one hand tied, an' using your shoulder rig."

Mady's breath caught, and she glanced involuntarily at Clance's silk vest. She knew that men sometimes carried a gun in a shoulder holster. But Clance wasn't the kind of man who would carry a gun. Besides, no one wore a gun in Feeding Hills. That was over, years ago; there used to be wild sprees on Saturday nights, she had heard, and sometimes a shooting, but all that had stopped when Jimmy's father became sheriff.

Clance laughed again and cuffed Jimmy roughly on the arm. But something in the corner of his mouth didn't laugh. "Get along, brat. What do you think I gave you the money for?"

Clance walked over and put one foot on the bench, looking down at Mady. He shook his head. "I don't understand it," he said. "How did a girl as pretty as you happen to come to a town like this?"

"But it isn't—" Mady began. How silly of her! She had almost started to defend the town. Clance laughed at her, and after a moment, Mady laughed, too.

"Don't tell me you're beginning to like the place?"

"Oh, no. I can't wait to get out."

"Of course you can't." Clance nodded. "I know how you feel. I felt that way once, too."

"Did you? Did you really?" Mady asked impulsively.

"You don't know how it was, Mady." He was looking at her, but his eyes seemed vacant. There was a tight twist to his mouth, and a tonelessness in his voice, as if this was a story he had told himself over and over. "The town hated me, and I hated it. I could never get along, couldn't do things the way they wanted me to. I wasn't like them and they hated me for it. Dad wanted me to work in his bank." He grinned crookedly. "Can you imagine me

working in a bank in this town? Having Dad order me around like I was a little kid?"

MADY SWALLOWED, and her heart beat faster. This was it, the thing about Clance that worried her. And yet, wasn't he right? Would there be any respect or even human sympathy in Feeding Hills for a man who wasn't as rough and hard as itself?

"Why did you come back, Clance?" she asked.

"I'll tell you why," he said, and his eyes were like chips of marble. "Because I had to show them I couldn't be pushed around any more. Show them I made out fine someplace else." Suddenly he smiled. "Listen to me, talking my head off. Believe me, I wouldn't talk like this to anyone else but you. You don't belong here at all."

"Thank you, Clance, for trusting me," Mady said, and she knew Clance wouldn't have asked her to stay in a place where she was unhappy. He would have taken her away; he'd get along anywhere. Yet didn't that mean that Lew had roots, firm and strong, that Clance didn't have? "I'm leaving next week," she told him.

Clance nodded. "Smart girl. Where to?"

She didn't know exactly, even now. She ought to go back to Boston, but she didn't want to. "I'm still looking at ads for teachers," Mady said.

Clance took her hand and squeezed it. "Look, Mady, I don't want to tell you what to do, but did you ever think of Kansas City? That's a big place now. I'm going there right after I leave here." He grinned. "Or any place you're going. You didn't think I'd let you get away from me, did you?"

"But Clance—" she faltered.

Clance seized her shoulders and turned her around. Not gently, the way Lew did, but as if there was a hunger inside him stronger than other men's. "Mady, you and I are going places together, understand?"

She reached up and loosened Clance's hands. "I—I don't know. You've got to give me time, Clance. I have to think."

"Sure; you think about it." There was a glint of amusement in his eyes that died out quickly. He would have kissed her then, even with the children playing hide-and-seek in the cottonwoods behind them, but Mady stepped back.

Oh, why did Lew have to be such a stubborn fool, Mady thought with an ache inside her, as she watched Clance close the gate and mount the bay stallion. Maybe she could learn to love Clance. Maybe she just could.

Then she saw Tommy sitting on the step with his lower lip drooping out, and felt a guilty pang. She walked over and ran her hand through Tommy's hair, dark as rain, just the color of Lew's. But Tommy shook her off.

"Go away!" he said, getting up. "You

Bath Night

By LIMERICK LUKE

A homesteader's puppy called Hank
Chased skunks until gosh how he stank!
Hank's owner said "Phew!"
And bodaciously threw
Poor Hank by the shank in a tank!

just wait and see what Lew does to that Clance Tully. He'll tear him apart; he'll—" He ran off, his chin quivering.

That was Lew all over! What he couldn't understand, he fought, until everything gentle and fine was gone. Nothing mattered any more, neither the school nor the children—only getting away. Could she take the stage that met the train in Benson in the morning, and leave everything? What had the town ever done for her except give her this awful, frightening year?

She asked Sal McHugh to keep an eye on the younger children and hurried into town. She would buy her ticket now, so there would be no turning back, no softening when Lew came to call, as she knew he would.

Why should she marry Lew, and make the biggest mistake of her life? No, she thought, the darkness of the town filling her with the old dread: the wagon yard, the blacksmith's shop with its row of men who courteously tipped their hats to her, the bank, and the post office-mercantile. Not even a dress shop. Nothing else, except for the saloon across the street.

THEN SHE FELT an odd coldness. Five strangers leaned against the gold scroll-work of the saloon front. Strangers were a rarity in Feeding Hills. More than that, they wore guns, two apiece, strapped low on their legs. They all looked alike, with their hats tipped low over their expressionless faces.

One of them swept off his hat in a low bow to her and grinned boldly. Mady colored. Nothing like that had ever happened to her before in Feeding Hills. She turned quickly and was about to go into the mercantile, when she saw Mrs. McHugh, Sal's mother, riding toward her.

She rode astride, her skirts drab and heavy with dust. Heat reddened her face, darkened her unfrilled shirtwaist with sweat. The men leaning against the saloon front whooped and catcalled, but Mrs. McHugh ignored them.

"Hello," she said, smiling, and holding out a bunch of desert marigolds to Mady. She had picked them in all this heat, Mady thought with a quick rush of pity.

"Thank you," Mady said, taking the flowers. "They're lovely." Had Mrs. McHugh ever been afraid, did fear ever catch her breath when she looked at this hard, dried-out land? But of course not, Mady decided, studying the broad, strong face. She remembered that Mrs. McHugh had been one of the first settlers, fought off Indians, lived in a tent made of sheets until wood for a cabin could be carted in from the mountains. She had raised six boys, and lost two of them during the Cochise trouble.

"You're looking kind of pale, Mady. You ought to get out more." Mrs. McHugh made a clucking noise. "We've got to keep you healthy, because—well, we need you so much here. I suppose I shouldn't say it, but none of us wanted some of the teachers we've had. They were just all we could get."

Mady felt a flush of shame in her cheeks. She couldn't leave now, not until school was over. She had to stick it out.

"You're coming over for dinner Sunday, aren't you? You and Lew?" Already they took it for granted about her and Lew, Mady thought with an angry flick of her auburn hair. Lew's doing, no doubt.

Lew and I—" she began, but Mrs. McHugh had turned to look back up the wagon trace where Feeding Hills melted into the Huachucas.

"Here he comes now," she said, smiling, and reaching down to pat Mady's cheek. "You look fine, honey. That hair of yours, and your eyes just matching it . . ." Then her face sobered as she glanced across the street at the men in front of the saloon. "You mustn't mind if Lew is kind of short today. He has a job to do. You'll be proud of him for it."

Mady caught the edge of worry in Mrs. McHugh's voice, and it touched off a throb of anxiety in herself. Trouble, she knew, as soon as Mrs. McHugh had gone, and she saw Lew's face. His mouth was a slit in the weathered tan, and his eyes looked straight ahead, not seeing her.

"Lew!" she called. "What is it?"

He pulled up and turned, still and silent, nothing at all changing in his face at sight of her.

"Lew, Lew . . ."

He racked his horse at the mercantile hitch-rail. "What are you doing here, Mady? Why aren't you at school?"

"I—" She stopped in amazement at his tone.

"You get on back to that schoolhouse as fast as you can," Lew said.

"Lew Anders!" Mady choked. "Who do you think you are to order me around?"

HE PUT his hand on her arm. "Do as I tell you, Mady." Then added in a gentler tone, "I'll come by to see you as soon as school is out."

"You'll do no such thing!" Mady stormed, her auburn eyes darkening with anger. And now she understood why Lew was in town. "Why, you—you— You're nothing but a child. You're jealous of Clance Tulley. You're going to fight him!"

Lew smiled grimly. "How did you guess?" He reached over and took her in his arms, in a hard, fierce embrace that left Mady breathless. She struggled against him, but his lips closed over hers, and she found her body answering his, while her mind raced madly. Why, oh why, did she have to love the big, stubborn fool?

"There!" he said, releasing her. "Now will you go?"

She rubbed her cheek against his shirt, feeling the strong, hard pound of his heart. "You aren't really going to fight Clance, are you, Lew?"

He nodded. "Not for the reason you think I am, Mady. Did you see those men in front of the saloon?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who they are?"

She shook her head.

"Clance Tulley brought them to town. They're wanted men, all of them. Clance is wanted, too, in half a dozen states—for bank robbery, train holdups, and I won't tell you what else."

Mady stared at him, wordless. What was it Clance had said? *I had to show them. Show them I couldn't be pushed around any more. Show them I made out fine someplace else.*

"There isn't room in this town for Clance's kind, Mady. They don't know it now, but they're all leaving before the day is out."

"But, Lew, it isn't your job. The sheriff—"

"Big Jim Hawkes isn't so big. He's out of town—on purpose. Old man Tulley holds this place in a double hitch, and he'd remember, come next election, who ran his precious son out. Only there's a few of us who don't owe Tulley a cent and aren't under his thumb."

"Not alone, Lew, not—"

"One against one, Mady. Me and Clance. When Clance leaves, the rest will go without a fight."

"But why does it have to be you?"

"Because I'm supposed to be handier than most with a gun, leastways, shooting at mark. We had a meeting last night, and I got elected."

"Oh, no, Lew. You can't do it!"

He took her hand in both of his. "Mady, look at this town. It isn't much yet, but it's something we built out of nothing. It's decent and it's honest and it's safe for women and children. In a week, in a day, it could be smashed, everything decent gone out of it. You have to cut off a rattlesnake's head before it strikes, Mady."

He kissed her lightly on the forehead. She watched him go, tears blurring her eyes. The men who had been standing in front of the blacksmith's shop had moved up to the saloon. Oh, Lew, she thought despairingly. How could she have believed he wouldn't appreciate anything gentle and fine!

Somehow she stumbled through the afternoon lessons, listening for the sounds she dreaded. The children were restless, some current of their parents' trouble touching them. Jimmy Hawkes, noisier and more bothersome than ever, yanked at the pigtail of the girl in front of him. Mady thought, he knows his father is afraid to face Clance Tulley. Without Lew, what might he grow up to be?

And Tommy. Only Tommy was calm, a

heartening glow of pride in his face. Mady looked out the window, and for the first time she really saw the town. Mrs. McHugh picking flowers in the grinding heat. Lew wanting the town to be better. She understood now that Lew wasn't hard, the town wasn't hard. It was only the backbone that had grown hard, fighting to make something decent out of desolation.

She wanted now so desperately to be part of the town, but she knew she never could. Not that the town wasn't right for her, but the other way around. She couldn't face the harshness of living here. She was weak. She had to leave, because Lew must never know that about her.

Then, while she was giving the spelling lessons, she heard the shots. Three of them. Oh, please, she prayed, don't let it be Lew. Don't let it be him! The children rushed to the window.

Only Sal McHugh stayed at her desk. Her eyes were big in the washed-out oval of her face, her mouth sprung open in a soundless cry. She stared, not at the window, but at the open doorway.

Then, above the excited chatter of the children, she heard it. A dry rattle, like pods blowing in the wind. A vicious sound that sent a chill through her. And almost at the same moment, she saw the rattlesnake inching over the sill.

The snake slithered its great length along the floor, its thick body undulating. Sal was nearest the door; she sat stricken with fright, mouth moist and trembling.

For a moment, Mady, too, sat paralyzed with fear. Then she looked around wildly. The rest of the children were at the window. They hadn't seen the snake yet. But even if Sal didn't move, if the snake didn't strike her, it couldn't fail to strike several of the children before help came.

Mady searched the room for a weapon. There was nothing. Not a stick or a stone. Her hands gripped the arms of her straight-backed chair, and suddenly she knew what she had to do. Knees shaking, she got up slowly, picked up the chair by the arms.

The snake stopped, its glittering eyes fixed on Sal. Then, as it sensed the slight movement behind, it turned, gliding around sideways. Mady walked towards it, holding the chair a few feet above the floor. The snake watched.

Mady breathed a little prayer. A square inch of chair leg to hit a spot so small. If she missed, if she missed . . . She brought the chair down hard, aiming for the back of the snake's neck. For a horrible moment, she thought she had missed. Then she felt the hard lump of the snake's head under the chair. Slowly, the body relaxed.

Mady was trembling; then she was crying, and suddenly Lew was there, holding her tight in his arms. "Mady, Mady," he whispered. She felt the safe wholeness of him, remembered the shots, and knew that Clance Tulley was dead.

And she—she had been afraid of a snake! "Oh, Lew, I was so scared. You'd never want a coward like me for a wife." Without wanting to, she was telling him how she had felt ever since she had come to Feeding Hills.

"Mady, don't you know we're all afraid? Jim Hawkes was afraid, Clance was afraid, and I was so scared I never thought I'd be able to draw my gun."

Lew turned her around so that she saw the snake, its great body limp and lifeless. "Mady, you could have saved yourself. If you had missed, you'd have been badly bitten. Why did you do it?"

"But there was no one else except me—" Mady began indignantly. Then she knew what Lew meant. You couldn't stop being afraid, but when there was something big to fight for you found the strength.

"Lew," she said, "I'm going to teach here next year."

"You are not," Lew said grimly. "You're going to marry me."

"I'm going to teach, just for one year, and marry you, both," Mady said firmly. "And I'm going to that school board and tell them this place needs paint, and it needs curtains, and it needs plumbing, and—"

"Honey, I've got a hankering to see that," Lew said, bending over her.

And he would, too, Mady Sims thought. Wasn't she the first schoolteacher in the history of Feeding Hills to be kissed in front of all the children?

OUT OF THE CHUTES

WE'LL go out on a limb and say that Bill Linderman has turned the trick of the century in sports. During the past year, he was not only president of the Rodeo Cowboy's Association, but he also won the All-Around Championship. That's about the same thing as the Commissioner of Baseball also being baseball's Most Valuable Player.

And Bill has been such an able president that he was recently reelected to that position for the third time. For the first year he was in office, Bill's rodeo career seemed to suffer. Many (include us in) were inclined to say it was natural that Bill couldn't keep at the top in competition when his mind was full of all the knotty problems of the RCA.

People now are eating their words—in fact, there's one back issue of RR that we're going to have for dinner. Bill actually ran away with the championship, about 2500 points ahead of Casey Tibbs, who came in second. He won nearly $34,000 plus about $3,000 for the title itself. The presidency of the RCA, however, pays not a penny. Probably, like most unpaid positions, it costs Bill a tidy sum just to fill it.

As we write this, the RCA is holding its annual convention in Denver, along with the rodeo. Bill is the busiest man there, what with riding broncs and going to committee meetings. We wonder if he ever sleeps. As soon as the show and the conclave are over we'll report. Our deadline couldn't wait for anything but the news flash.

We're indebted to Gene Lamb, editor of *Rodeo Sports News,* for what is our current favorite rodeo story. It's about Manuel Enos, once Amateur Saddle Bronc Champion, and now a worthy competitor in both bronc- and bull-riding, as well as bulldogging.

It happened at Salinas, Calif., last year, when Manuel had a spell of bad luck. His first time out of the chutes was in bulldogging. He made his dive from the horse's back, "flying through the air," says Gene, "looking for a steer to grab." He landed where the steer wasn't—flat on his face, plowing up the dirt in the arena. When he picked himself up, one of his cheeks looked like beefsteak and the rest of him felt just about as raw.

He wasn't bad enough hurt, he figured, to stay out of the saddle bronc-riding. But his mount seemed to know how shaky he was and after about three seconds Manuel was sailing through the air again, looking this time for a soft place to land. He didn't find it, though, and he crashed just about as hard and flat as the first time.

He got to his feet and staggered over to the fence to feel for any broken bones. While he was testing, a solicitous cowboy came over and asked: "Are you all right, Manuel?"

Manuel turned to look at the cowboy out of his good eye, the one that was only half-shut. "No," he groaned, "my feet are killing me!"

SPEAKING of stories, we heard one old-timer define a dude: "He's a fellow who thinks you're probably pretty good if you tell him you roped a calf in under ten seconds. A cowboy is a fellow who thinks you're probably a liar."

This is a remark that calf-roper Jim Bob Altizer wouldn't be amused by. He roped a calf in 9.9 seconds at the Rosenberg, Tex., Jackpot Roping, by far the fastest time of the meet. But this spectacular performance netted him only $100 out of a jackpot of $1500. He just broke even because he paid that much out in entry fees.

The trouble was that Jim Bob had seven more calves to tie up, and on those he did so *un*spectacularly that he wound up in 12th place in a field of 15.

Winner of the match was the probable winner of the RCA Championship in calf-roping for the year, Don McLaughlin. Don roped his eight calves in 117.5 seconds—and average of 14.6 per calf. Don's average was almost a full second better than second place George Epperson's, 15.4, but the other runners-up were just a whisker behind—Doyle Riley, 15.5, and Rex Beck, 15.6.

Roping is just about the most active event in rodeo during the winter season. At Yuma, Ariz., there was also a jackpot roping, plus a matched steer-roping between Ike Rude and Carl Arnold for a $2,000 purse. Each man roped ten steers in two days—the winner to be the one with the lowest total time.

On the first day the men were nip and tuck. Ike had his first steer down in 24.4; Carl did it in 24.1. On Ike's second, the clock stopped at 21.3; Carl's time was 21.4. On the third steer Carl began to pull ahead, and on the fourth Ike missed with his first loop and had to throw another. But his score of 40.4 seconds didn't hurt him much because Carl caught a 10-second penalty for breaking the barrier for a total time of 35.2. And on the last critter of the day it was Carl who missed his toss, so at the halfway mark Ike had a slim lead of 9.4 seconds.

You couldn't have got odds on either man that night, but you sure could get an argument—either way. One thing everybody agreed on, though, was that the steers were as tricky, as tough, as just plain salty as a rodeo fan could wish. If steers could talk, they would have replied, "You ain't seen nothing yet!"

NEARLY every one of them was pure devil the next day. Even after a good catch and fall, the ropers found it all but impossible to wrap them up, or even to stay out of roof-range. Both men had to cope with steers who got up again after they'd been thrown, and the scores began to mount higher and higher.

Ike's best for the day was a slow 35.1, but Carl on his ninth steer made the best time of the match, 20.2. That must have discouraged Ike, as well it might have, because it took him 97.1 seconds to dispose of his last critter. Then of course, it was all over but the shouting and Carl's pocketing the check. He took his time—34.3 seconds—on his final steer, and ended up with a lead of over two minutes.

There was also a jackpot team-tying contest, with 15 teams entered. Each man put up $100, making a tidy purse of $3,000, to be split 40 per cent for the lowest total time on five steers, 30 per cent for second and 20 per cent for third. The final 10 per cent was to go to the team which made the fastest time on just one steer.

The team of Clyde Allred and Dave Mansuer set a target to aim for on their first steer, which they had all trussed up in 13.1 seconds. No one else beat that mark, so Clyde and Dave took the smallest slice of the purse, plus the next largest for coming in third. Their total time was 131.4 seconds, which, if our arithmetic is right, averages out to over 26 seconds per steer—so you can see what a big help their 13-second job was to them.

In second place were Nelson Conley and Ralph Narrimore, who took 126.3 seconds on their five animals. The winners were Fred Darnell and Joe Glenn, and their total time was a flashy 115.1.

You've probably heard tell that the best ropers come from the Southwest, but if you judge by the Yuma contest, you have to narrow the field still further and decide that the best ropers come from Arizona. Every single man who won a single penny in either of those two contests was an Arizonan.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

DESERT CACHE

By Dave Barron

Ellen's eyes, bright with tears, were on Corey

THE STORY SO FAR: Robbed and left to die in the Sonoran desert, DAVE COREY is rescued by ELLEN WORTH and her fiancé, TED NEALE. When Corey recovers he sides them against the men who have forced Ellen to close her mine, the *Dos Cedros*. Arriving with them in Escala, he meets HOLLY SHANE ARLIDGE. Her husband, whom she had married after breaking off with Corey, is dead—and her brother-in-law, ROSS ARLIDGE, turns out to be one of the two who drygulched Corey. Making another try for Corey's life, Ross is killed. Holly Arlidge is often in the company of CHARLES BRUSS, Big West Copper boss, and Corey wonders what part Bruss has in making the *Dos Cedros* close down. Suspicious, he follows Bruss across the Border, sees him meet a Mexican and stealthily go into town. . . .

PART THREE

CONVINCED that he had hit upon something big, Corey continued to stalk the pair. Avoiding infrequent pedestrians, they made their way to the south edge of the village. There they circled to the back of a long, low structure with small windows set high in thick adobe walls. From the rear of an adjacent building Corey heard the rap of knuckles on wood. A shaft of murky light pierced the darkness as a door opened. Two figures slipped inside and the light vanished.

Corey moved swiftly upon a closer examination of the building. Outwardly it looked dark and still. However, on the far side, a glimmer of light called attention to a shutter sagging an inch or so on loosened hinges. A portico shaded the front of the building. Grasping its edge, Corey swung himself upward. On hands and knees he moved along the top of the wide adobe wall of the main structure. As he neared the point above the faulty shutter, a Spanish-speaking voice, lifted in a tirade, floated to his ears.

Quietly he wriggled about and lowered head and shoulders to place his eye in line with the aperture at the shutter top. There was a jarring familiarity about the screechy tone of that voice. Automatically Corey began to translate its remarks into English. Then his vision focused upon the scene below. Shock, like a sheet of flame, ripped through him.

The building was a warehouse. A lighted lantern stood on an upended crate. Seated on other crates and boxes were Bruss and two Mexicans. The latter were heavily armed, with bandoliers across their chests. Corey had seen many of their kind. Mexican rebels. He had underestimated Bruss. He had believed the Big West man was merely paying Border riffraff to harass the small mine owners in the disguise of Mexican rebels. He had not dreamed Bruss might be conspiring with the genuine article. Now he knew this was so. And his blood ran cold, for in his estimation Bruss was in league with the blackest of the lot. Salazar!

Fascinated, Corey's gaze followed the figure pacing back and forth, and pouring out complaints to the accompaniment of passionate gestures. Short, with a twisted back that lifted one shoulder higher than the other, Juan Luis Salazar was as ugly physically as his garb and huge sombrero were resplendent with gold braid. Looting had evidently been profitable lately. Although he wore no bandolier, he too was heavily armed, and a saber clanked at his side with each step. His small, dark face, twisting as he screeched out his words, reminded Corey of a picture he had once seen of a dried and shrunken human head.

Salazar was bewailing the circumstances that made it necessary for a great general and liberator to sneak into a village when he ought properly to ride in at the head of his glorious army and receive the plaudits of a grateful populace. Apparently it was a subject upon which he could wax eloquent for hours.

But Bruss's patience was wearing thin. He interrupted. "Everyone concedes the greatness of General Salazar." Due to his faulty Spanish accent, the irony of his voice was lost upon the Mexicans. Preening his mustache, Salazar permitted him to continue.

"It might be well to remember, however, that keeping our meeting here secret is as important to you as to me. Should it be learned that General Salazar's forces are this close to Escala, would it not be instantly assumed that they are guilty of the recent raids and killings on United States soil? Would you have word speed to Washington and American troops patrolling this area to put an end to our dealings before you have secured all the arms necessary to victory for your cause?"

THE THROBBING at Corey's temples was not all due to the rush of blood to his head as a result of his dangling position. Forced, nevertheless, to straighten up for a moment's relief, he remained so when Salazar's reply reached him clearly.

"You speak truly, amigo. We must proceed according to plan. But I do not like plans that fail. Dispose of the señorita, you say, and from her father's hands the *Dos Cedros* mine will pass easily into yours. Without her courage to shame them, the others will also sell. To this end I pledge my aid."

"For a price!" grunted Bruss.

"*Sí.*" Unperturbed, the Mexican inclined his head. "For certain arms and ammunition on account. And on the day your company controls all the copper in this area north of the Border—fifty thousand American dollars. That sum will equip my army magnificently, assuring my ultimate march to victory. Towards that glorious end I

sacrified three of my loyal followers . . ."

"Don't forget I supplied a countryman, too," put in the Big West man.

"But with a difference," pointed out Salazar silkily. "The Farley *muchacho* had worked for Señorita Worth. To you the death of such a countryman along with Mexican raiders on United States soil was important. It would halt suspicion against you because of the death of your man, Garvey, in the same manner weeks ago. No? You are clever, amigo. To pick a youth so easily deceived—to make him believe he was joining a Mexican outlaw band as your undercover agent to learn the identity of their gringo leader—"

"Get to the point!"

There was impatience and wariness in Bruss's voice. Evident though it was that Salazar loved the sound of his own voice, he was not re-hashing motives and past operations merely for the sake of indulging that fancy. He was building up to something. As aware of this as Bruss, Corey lowered head and shoulders once more and peered into the room.

Bruss was gazing up at the Mexican raider, narrow-eyed. The latter stood before him, hands on hips and feet widespread. His smile would have chilled the devil.

"You are even a hero, now that you fought with such valor to protect the señorita's life and money. No?" he continued. "But you failed to arrange the unfortunate stray bullet—"

"I told you there was another passenger."

"Did he not have a back? And was there not a gun in your hand?"

"Yes. But the holdup party had to be finished off first. By that time we were face to face in the coach, and there was a gun in his hand, too!"

Salazar shrugged. "So a golden opportunity slipped away, and my poor Pablo and Ruben and Juan were sacrificed in vain—"

"Don't try to pull that on me!" interrupted Bruss harshly. "Doublecrossing them never upset you any!"

"But is it still not necessary for the señorita to die? For the same price I will make the sacrifice again. A reason for her to travel once more to Sand Gulch could be arranged."

"So that's it! You were leading up to another stage holdup deal!" A look half admiration, half revulsion, swept over the Big West man's face. "Your poor Pablo and Ruben and Juan are scarcely cold in their graves, and already you're licking your chops to send three or four more dumb trusting *peones* after them. And just to get your hands on an extra shipment of arms right away! I thought I'd was tough when it comes to getting what I want. But you . . ."

"It will take many guns and much ammunition to free *Mejico*. The *peones* who follow me are patriots, señor. And does it matter where or how patriots die for their country?"

"For their country, eh?" Bruss smiled grimly. "Well, I won't argue that point with you. That's your business. But we'll forget about Ellen Worth for a while. We'd better tend to our other irons in the fire and make sure nothing more goes wrong."

SALAZAR scowled his disappointment. Before he could lash out, however, Bruss continued quickly.

"Anyway, I'm paying off on that stagecoach job. You'll soon have twenty cases of new carbines and three hundred rounds of ammunition for each weapon. That ought to keep you going for a while."

Salazar's face cleared. "When?"

"I received word today. The shipment will arrive in two weeks. Soon as it's here I'll send word by José and you can pick it up as usual at Big Rock."

"Then José must continue to visit his cousin here in Old Escala."

"Yes."

Salazar frowned thoughtfully. "José has an understandable fondness for tequila and women," he mused. "For the sake of prudence, it must be curbed. Only I can put sufficient fear into his heart to accomplish that end." He turned to one of his lieutenants. "Summon José!"

"Sí, mi general!"

Saluting stiffly, the Mexican lieutenant

made for the door. For the first time Corey realized that the *peon* who had guided Bruss to this place of rendezvous was not inside. He must have been sent out at once to stand guard.

"Reckon I just missed him, getting up here," mused Corey. "Now if I'm only that lucky getting down—"

He knew it was time to clear out. Before him lay a chance to catch Bruss red-handed running guns to below-Border rebels. But it would come to nothing if the least suspicion that this meeting had been spied upon should be aroused.

The back door opened and closed too quietly to be heard at this distance. Corey waited until it seemed reasonable to suppose the guard had joined his leader and confederates inside. Then quietly he made his descent from the roof. In the shadow of the portico, however, he froze. His ears had caught the scuff of a booted foot in sand. Someone was advancing along the alley to his right.

"Qué es?"

The closeness of the challenge discouraged thought of flight. Corey whipped about and lunged. Head-on, he struck a dark figure and took it to the ground. The barrel of a half-leveled rifle rapped him smartly on the forehead. Clawing for a throat grip, he was aware of a bandolier criss-crossing the chest of the man attempting feebly, in surprise, to fend off his attack. That made his opponent the rebel lieutenant who had called José inside. Having taken over the latter's sentry duties outside, he had probably advanced to the street to make sure the way would be clear for the imminent departure of his party.

Silently Corey cursed the short-sightedness that had taken him off the roof at just the wrong moment. But one hand found the throat both hands were seeking. As his fingers dug into warm flesh, the instinct of self-preservation routed the Mexican's daze. Tearing at Corey's wrist, his body began to thresh wildly. They rolled over and over. Then a sudden shout lifted across the street.

Corey drove a left to his opponent's chin and slewed about.

ALARM stabbed him. Rolling out of shadows into moonlight, their struggle had attracted the attention of two villagers who had just emerged from a *cantina* across the street. The latter's excited cries would quickly draw other observers. Attacked in darkness, it was unlikely that the rebel lieutenant would be able to supply a description of his assailant. If he could escape before these villagers drew near enough to obtain more than a glimpse of him, all might still be well.

Corey did not pause to follow that line of thought. His conclusion was simply the split-second grasp of a situation of which a keen, resourceful brain is capable. Simultaneously he clipped his adversary's chin once more and tore free of clutching hands. Leaping to his feet, he ran, half-crouched to conceal his height. For his size made him conspicuous and Bruss would surely change his plans if it reached his ears that anyone answering Dave Corey's description had been seen in the vicinity of his rendezvous with Salazar tonight.

Behind him new cries of excitement lifted. "Assassin! Robber!" That shout came from the rebel lieutenant. Corey had to applaud the other's quick wits. The rebel was attempting to set the pack on his fleeing attacker's heels in the hope of diverting attention from himself long enough to make his own getaway. And his ruse proved successful. Emboldened by Corey's flight, the entire group of villagers took after him with howls of righteous zeal.

Most *peones* were too poor to own guns. Not wishing to disclose their presence in Old Escala, Salazar and his other confederates, like his lieutenant, would not dare join in the chase. That much was in Corey's favor. On the other hand, the uproar began to draw villagers from all sides.

Turning into a side street, Corey ran headlong into a trio armed with clubs. He went through them like a battering ram through a flimsy door. Their wild squawks dwindled quickly behind his flying feet. Dashing down alleys, ducking about corners, Corey pressed northward. Finally he he tripped over something in the dark and went sprawling.

He scrambled up, all but winded. An open space ahead marked the international border. He was halfway across it, when a gun barked and lead whistled over his head. Bruss—or more likely the guard, José, whose presence in the Mexican village would require no explanation—had joined in the attempt to run him down. Mechanically he zigzagged. Three more bullets whizzed by. Then he gained the shelter of a structure on the American side and fell against it, gasping for breath.

He did not believe his Mexican pursuers would cross the Border, and he was right. In moonlight he saw dark shapes come to a milling halt. The tumult of the pack dwindled to cries of disappointment. But he was not yet safe. The sound of gunfire was apt to draw citizens of New Escala this way, and it would be just as disastrous to be seen and recognized by any of them.

This realization put Corey on the move again. Heading for the nearest alley, he circled the building and was halted by the running tread of booted feet on a wooden sidewalk. Already the first of his countrymen were approaching. Scarcely had he ducked into concealment before two men in rough work garb, guns in hands, pounded by. Shouts greeted them from the Mexican side. Corey paused to listen in on the verbal exchange that took place.

An assassination had been attempted in Old Escala by one who had fled across the Border to United States soil. The motive? Who could tell, save the victim? Who was he? Nobody knew. He had vanished in all the excitement. But the truth could be wrung from the lips of the would-be assassin if he could be apprehended . . .

COREY lingered no longer. Moving on, he turned into an alley. On his second step he blundered into a rubbish pile and set tin cans into motion with a clanking rattle. As the clatter began to subside, a cry lifted sharply not far away.

"That's him—hightailing! Let's get him, Pete!"

What followed became a nightmare of turning and twisting, of running until lungs threatened to burst, of being driven into dead ends by others who had rallied to the hue and cry. Finally he reached the street and peered cautiously into it.

Men not actively taking part in the pursuit of an unknown quarry were standing about on saloon steps and sidewalks. The Arlidge Hotel stood just to his right. Spurred by a sound of voices in the alley behind him, Corey slipped to the hotel veranda and leaned against a pillar. From a distance there should be nothing to set him apart from the others waiting to learn the results of the chase in progress. A little time would remedy his labored breathing, and he would be safe. If only that small boon would be granted him.

It was not. Scarcely had he taken his position on the veranda, when two familiar figures stepped out of a passageway at the end of the block and moved in his direction. They were Marshal Lott and Charles Bruss. Trust the latter to hasten back to the American side of the line.

Corey knew he dared not face the Big West man in his present condition. If he walked away, he was apt to be hailed. Voices in the alley announced that line of retreat still cut off, and with each ragged breath he drew the marshal and the Big West man came nearer. Trapped, Corey for an instant could neither move nor think.

Suddenly a voice spoke behind him. "In here—quick!"

Holly stood just inside the open hotel doorway. Driven by the urgency of his need, Corey obeyed her command mechanically. But reason asserted itself at once. Stepping to one side, he halted, wary and at bay. Outside, a sound of voices began to grow louder, nearer.

Holly said lowly, "My office! I'll get rid of them!"

"Bruss and the marshal will be along in a minute."

"I don't care who you're running from!" she cut in. "I'll cover up for you. Just get out of sight!"

She had always been impulsive, reckless, but he had never known her to go back on her word. Corey crossed the lobby to

her office as directed. He closed the door behind him, leaving a slit through which to watch and listen. Maybe he was a fool to believe that in some ways she had not changed. When it came right down to it, would she actually lie to Bruss for his sake?

Corey's big body tensed as Bruss and the marshal entered. Discovering Holly alone, they stopped short.

"We thought we saw someone duck in here a minute ago," said the lawman, glancing around.

Holly nodded. "He ran through and out the side door. I saw him."

"Who was he?"

Corey held his breath. But Holly merely looked apologetic. "I don't know. I caught only a glimpse of him from the back. He was a Mexican."

"A Mex!" exclaimed Bruss. "Are you sure?"

His brightening expression gave Corey a clue to his thoughts. A villager on the way home innocently passing the place of his rendezvous with Salazar . . . the rebel sentry's challenge a blunder that had caused him to be attacked in frightened self-defense . . . the villager's subsequent flight merely the result of panic . . .

"Are you sure?" he repeated.

Holly shrugged. "His clothes were those of a *peon*."

"Why should a Mexican seek refuge on this side of the line?" said Lott.

"Maybe he figured it was the quickest way to lose the Mexicans chasing him," said Holly. "After the hue and cry died down he meant to slip back. He probably didn't expect anyone on this side to take up the matter."

"Which they wouldn't—if there hadn't been shooting," admitted the marshal.

Holly said, "What did he do?"

"Jumped another Mex and tried to rob or kill him, I reckon. Nobody's too sure, since the victim skedaddled, too. But the guilty party was believed to be an American, so I had to try to round him up. By the way, the desk here faces the door. Howcome you didn't get a good look at him as he came in?"

THE QUESTION slid out so casually that Corey expected Holly to be caught off guard. But her wits proved a match for those of the astute lawman.

"I wasn't behind the desk," she said composedly. "I was in my office, working on my books. The door was open just enough to hear if anyone rang." She gestured towards a bell beside the registry ledger.

"Where's your night clerk?" said Bruss.

"This is Henry's night off." Holly looked from one to the other. "Any further questions, gentlemen? Or maybe you'd like to look around. Go ahead."

She had, however, completely satisfied the lawman. "I've done enough sashayin' around for one night," he said. "Wasn't no harm done anyway, so I'm going to forget the whole thing. Good night, Holly. Coming, Bruss?"

They departed together.

A few moments later Holly came into the office and closed the door. Standing with her back to it, she gazed at Corey with dark, unfathomable eyes.

"I suppose you want to know what I was doing over the Line?" he said.

"I can guess that," she answered. "If the name of the rebel leader responsible for the recent raids on U.S. soil could be learned—also the size of his army—it might be possible to persuade Washington to send U.S. troops here. I'd say you were nosing around Old Escala for that sort of information and crossed paths with the wrong party. Am I right?"

A tumult started up in Corey's brain. Was she really in ignorance of Bruss's true nature and schemes? Suddenly he knew he wanted to believe so. Forgetting her question, he asked one of his own.

"Why did you say the man they'd seen run in here was a Mexican?"

She shrugged. "It was the farthest description from yours I could think of."

"That's not what I mean. Why did you hide me—lie for me?"

Her dark eyes met his steadily. "Because of what we once meant to each other," she said. "Because I can't stand to see Ellen Worth make a fool of you!"

Corey was thunderstruck. Before he

could find his tongue, she continued passionately.

"Ellen put you up to your jaunt tonight, didn't she? She'd do anything to secure troop protection for her wagons so she can start up that precious mine again!"

Corey said bewilderedly, "It's not just her mine! Jason— all the small mine owners have thrown in together. And the stakes are equal."

"They are not!" Holly walked towards him. "Ellen's a woman. She won't be called on to do any of the fighting and dying. All she has to do is spur you men on. And she doesn't care how many of you lose your lives, just so long as the battle is won for her! She doesn't care about anything except her own selfish interests!"

COREY recalled Ellen's concern for the people dependent upon the operation of the Dos Cedros Mine for their livelihood. "You're wrong," he said, shaking his head. "Ellen's not like that. She—"

"So she's 'Ellen' to you, is she? You're a fool, Dave! That stuck-up baggage would never look at a mere wagon boss. Not honestly. Besides, she's engaged to Ted Neale."

"I know that."

"Still you're willing to risk your life for her sake?"

"I'm in debt to Ellen Worth."

"Fiddlesticks! You'd been hauled into Sand Gulch if she and Neale hadn't been on that stage. And you'd have been taken care of just the same."

"Probably. But my doctor bill and board —everything to keep me comfortable and put me back on my feet—was paid for out of Ellen Worth's pocket."

Holly gazed at him a long moment, her widening eyes and the set of her lips betraying an inner struggle. Suddenly she crossed the room to a small safe and knelt before it. Swinging open the heavy door, she took something from an inner compartment and rose to her feet.

"All you owe Ellen Worth is money," she said. "Pay her off and leave Escala while you can—alive!"

Her hand moved. Something heavy thumped upon her desk. Corey's gaze dropped to the object and riveted upon it. The small buckskin bag looked oddly familiar. He snatched it up. When he found initials burned on one side, the blood seemed to burst from his veins. For it was his own sack of gold. The very one stolen from him in the desert!

The significance of Holly's possession of it sank in slowly. When he lifted his eyes, he said, "Then you knew all along what Ross Arlidge had done!"

Holly's hands lifted. Her face was pale. "No!"

"Who was his pardner?" pursued Corey relentlessly. "You know that, too, don't you?"

"No!" she cried. "I knew nothing until you told your story the night Ross tried to kill you. He told me he'd won this gold in a poker game in El Paso, and he turned it over to me in exchange for coin and paper money. He must have divided that with his accomplice."

The story hung together. It could be true. But she had had plenty of time to think it up, and he had just witnessed an exhibition of her skill in the art of lying. Abruptly he remembered that she had returned the gold only in the hope of persuading him to leave Escala. Out of Bruss's way? Then it was Bruss for whom she was concerned.

Surrendering to a surge of bitterness, Corey picked up the sack of gold and thrust it into a pocket. "Thanks for the return of this," he said evenly. "Good night."

"Dave!" She followed him to the door. "Are you going to leave town?"

He looked down at her stonily. "No," he said. "I'm going to stick around and take my chances. With the Mexican raiders— and with Ellen Worth!"

THE LAST WAGON and harness repairs were completed, the last mule re-shod. Corey posted guards about the *Dos Cedros* wagon yard, day and night. And then nothing remained save to await Neale's return. In a saloon, Corey sighted Sykes, the stage company's shotgun guard. Since this was the first time he had laid

eyes on the man since the attempted holdup that had resulted in carnage, he started to work his way towards the roulette table at which Sykes stood, watching the play. But the latter moved on, vanished into the crowd and was seen no more. There was no way of telling whether his disappearance was deliberate or a matter of chance. Shrugging, Corey dismissed him from his mind.

After that time passed uneventfully. Corey broadened his acquaintance with former small mine workers, and his sympathies for those with family responsibilities were quickly aroused. Bruss claimed to be full-handed at the Big West Mine, and so could give none of them even temporary work. Few had sufficient funds laid by to pull up stakes and go elsewhere. So they were holding on grimly, in the hope that the *Dos Cedros*, the Shamrock, the Little Gem, and the Yucca Belle would soon open up again.

Neale had expected to be gone a week. As the time for his return drew near, the strain of waiting caused Ellen to lose her condescending airs. She brought coffee and sandwiches to the men standing night guard, and she spent long hours in the office shack, going over Neale's books. First he was one day overdue, then two.

"It doesn't mean anything," Corey told Ellen that night. "There could be a dozen reasons for delay—none of them bad."

"I suppose so."

But she didn't sound convinced, and she continued to linger. Shortly after midnight Corey left her alone in the office shack and went out to make a routine check with each sentry. He was moving towards the gate when the voice of the guard stationed there lifted in a sudden challenge.

Corey broke into a run. Simultaneously he heard a response. "It's me—Neale!"

The voice was that of a man injured or exhausted. At the same moment Corey caught the soft thudding of slow-moving hoofs.

"Open the gate!" he ordered, and sprang to help.

It was the dark of the moon. Slowly a single horse and rider took shape in starlight and loomed close. A tall, broad figure slumped wearily in the saddle. Across the front of it a second human figure dangled limply, face downward.

"It's Jim Barker," said Neale. "Send for Doc Walters."

Corey despatched the gate sentry on that errand and then followed Neale to the bunkhouse. As the latter dismounted stiffly, Corey went inside to light a lamp. Ellen came running from the office. In frozen silence she watched Neale and Corey carry the wounded man inside and place him on a bunk. Barker was unconscious and breathing raspingly through his mouth. A blood-stained bandage, fashioned from strips of shirt, criss-crossed his naked chest.

"I think the bleeding has stopped," said Neale. "Maybe he'll pull through."

"The others?" queried Corey.

Neale's mouth twisted. "Dead!" he said bitterly. "All dead!"

There was a shallow slash above his own right temple and that side of his face was caked with dried blood. He was begrimed with sweat and dust, and his eyes were red-rimmed and inflamed.

"The mules and wagons?" whispered Ellen dryly.

"GONE!" rasped Neale. "They hit our camp this morning just before daybreak. Swooped down on us like Apaches. Johnson and Barker were hit through their blankets. I fired a couple shots and then my head seemed to explode. When I came to, the sun was straight overhead. The mules were gone and the wagons were charred wreckage. Barker and I were the only survivors. Apparently they left us for dead. I was lucky enough to catch a horse that had bolted and get away, or the desert would have finished us off, too."

Corey's jaw was set so hard it ached. He had difficulty speaking. "A guard! Good God, man! Didn't you post a guard at night?"

Neale was too done in to bridle. "Shawnessy," he said wearily. "A Mexican must have slipped up and finished him off first. I found him with a knife in his back."

Something in Corey's chest swelled and

burst. Shawnessy! That the big Irishman had been one of Neale's ill-fated party had slipped his mind for the moment. Shawnessy dead—all his lusty, brawling vigor forever stilled? A mountain lion slain without a struggle by a creeping, poisonous snake. . . .

The doctor arrived, trailed by the inevitable crowd. Neale repeated his story in greater detail. He had buried the dead as best he could in shallow graves. Their bodies could be recovered for proper interment. Otherwise there was nothing to be done. The raiders would long ago have vanished across the Border with their loot.

An hour later Barker had been transferred by litter to his own home. When the doctor departed also, the crowd dispersed. Head bandaged, Neale sat on the edge of the bunk he had been advised to occupy for the night. Although his face was pale and drawn, he had come through his ordeal in surprisingly good shape. When Ellen reminded him that he had better get some rest, Corey spoke up.

"There's something I'd like to know first."

Neale's eyes brooded upon him. "How the raiders found out we went to Douglas instead of Pima City?" he inquired.

Corey nodded.

Ellen said dispiritedly, "What difference does that make now?"

Neither man paid her any heed. "We couldn't have been followed," said Neale. "Shawnessy trailed behind all the way to make sure of that. Maybe it really was Mexican rebels this time. Maybe we just had the bad luck to be spotted by a foraging party."

"Maybe," said Corey. "But I'd call that too much of a coincidence. I think a better guess would be a sell-out to Big West!"

"You mean someone in our camp could have told Bruss our plan for a price?" Neale frowned. "But only a few of us knew—"

"Tongues can slip. And just an unguarded word or two could have been enough."

Neale nodded thoughtfully. "There could even be a paid spy among us. I've toyed with that suspicion before, as a matter of fact. The last time we sent out an ore train and laid a trap for the raiders it nearly boomeranged. Almost as though they'd been warned."

"What difference does it make?" repeated the girl. The corners of her mouth dropped. "We're beaten now."

"No, we're not!" Tersely Corey recounted his adventure in Old Escala a few nights ago. To spare the girl he did not disclose that the main object of the stage holdup had been her death. That could be told Neale later. He said merely that Bruss had hoped to have her robbed of the money fetched from back East. Her eyes dilated with remembered horror. Both she and Neale grew excited upon learning definitely that Bruss was the instigator of the recent raids that had pushed all the small mine owners to the brink of ruin.

BUT THEIR EXCITEMENT did not last. By the time Corey had finished his tale, both their faces were gloomy once more.

"You took a big chance for nothing," said Neale. "It's too late."

Corey's temper began to climb. "What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Isn't Big Rock on this side of the line?"

"Yes. But—"

"And there's going to be a shipment of arms turned over to Salazar there soon. All we've got to do is be on hand every night until it comes off. Capture the guns and some men from both sides, and that will put an end to Bruss and Big West!"

Neale shook his head regretfully. "It's the big chance all right," he said. "But it's come too late."

"Even if we should beat Big West now, we still wouldn't be able to re-open our mines," said the girl. "Maybe we could sue for damages, but it would take a long time—perhaps years—to collect a settlement. In the meantime, all our financial resources are exhausted."

"She wasn't able to borrow a cent back East," explained Neale. "The money she brought back came from the sale of family jewelry. Jason kicked in a few pieces his

wife left. The wives of Baker and Trace donated a few heirlooms, too. It was a last desperate gamble for all of them. And now that the equipment the money was spent on has been stolen and destroyed—" He spread his hands hopelessly.

Corey felt a throb of blood at his temples. "What will you do?" he asked the girl.

She seemed too crushed even for tears. "What the others have wanted me to do all along," she answered. "Sell. I'll send word out to Jason, Baker, and Trace in the morning. As soon as they come into town, we'll go to Bruss and get it over with."

"No!" The protest exploded on Corey's lips. To picture them knuckling under to Bruss, after the blood that had been spilled resisting him, turned his stomach. The thought that Bruss should win out and escape payment for all he had done was too much to bear.

Neale smiled ironically. "Maybe you've got a better idea?" he said. "Or maybe twenty thousand dollars or so you'd be willing to lend us?"

A muscle began to twitch in Corey's cheek. Why not? He had many times that much in gold in his desert cache. Ross Arlidge's unknown traveling companion, like Arlidge himself, was probably one of Bruss's accomplices. He had been so greedy for the small amount of gold on Dave Corey that day. As greedy as Salazar. Wouldn't it be a form of ironic justice to use that gold to bring them both, and Bruss, to the end they all deserved?

Besides, there was the score to even for Shawnessy, who had saved his life. For Barker and the other men who had died—Shawnessy's kind of men, and his own kind.

Abruptly Corey realized that for him the payment of his debt to Ellen Worth was no longer the main issue. That had been set aside by something bigger. Bruss was his personal enemy now. The fight against Big West was his personal fight.

He said, "Twenty thousand? I'd be willing to spend that—and more—to lick Bruss. The guns will be turned over to Salazar about eight days from now. That should give me just time enough to go after my gold."

They stared at him. "Gold?" said Ellen.

Corey told them, then, of his strike below the Border. For the first time he described in detail Salazar's attack upon his camp and his narrow escape.

Ellen's eyes brightened. "You really have a fortune in gold hidden away?" she said eagerly. "And you'll go after it?"

"I'll leave tonight," said Corey.

Neale snorted. "And that's the last we'll ever see of you!"

Corey squared upon him.

Ellen said doubtfully, "What do you mean, Ted?"

"I know a phony and a grandstander when I see one!" retorted Neale. "He hasn't any gold. He's all mouth. And if he pulls out now, he'll never show up in these parts again!"

Neale had just put a severe ordeal behind him and his head was bandaged. He could not be punched. He could only be shown.

"I'll be right back," said Corey. "With proof!"

WHEELING, he strode from the bunkhouse. He had hidden the recovered sack of gold in the stable for safekeeping. Starting that way, he checked himself. He had no wish to be seen retrieving it, and neither would he want anyone about to witness his departure later. Accordingly he took a turn about the wagon yard and sent each sentry home.

To those as yet unaware of the suspicions against Big West, he said, "I'll take over." To the more informed, he said, "The big blow was struck last night. Bruss won't bother with the little equipment left here. Might as well go home and get some sleep."

He waited until the last man had gone. Then he lighted a lantern, made his way to a corner stall, and with a stable fork raked away a layer of dirty straw. It took but a moment to uncover the buried sack of gold. Carefully concealing its former

hiding place, he blew out the lantern and returned to the bunkhouse.

No one awaited him there. Despite the shape he was in, Neale had taken Ellen Worth home. He would drive himself until he dropped in the effort to fence her off from the attentions of other men. Corey cursed Neale's stupid jealousy. Then he thought of something else. Neale was so sure he was a liar and blowhard—he had so easily swung Ellen over to that opinion—that they had not waited even a little while for the proof he had promised them.

The simmering in Corey's veins turned to cold anger. He had been gone about twenty minutes. That would give the couple about enough time to reach Ellen's house. Neale, it was said, lived in a boarding house close by. Probably he would go on to his own quarters after taking the girl to her door. But it might be possible to catch them together.

Corey's stride carried him along swiftly. He pounded on the Worth front door.

Presently Ellen's voice called out, "Who is it?"

"Corey. I want to talk to you and Neale. I've something to show you!"

"Ted left five minutes ago. I'm alone and it's late. Go away!"

Corey's jaw set. He had to leave tonight in order to make a round trip to his cache in eight days. And he had to convice her that his gold existed, lest she concede victory to Bruss while he was away.

"Open the door!" he pleaded.

She did not answer. Instead he heard her footsteps beginning to withdraw. So that was it. She thought she could just walk off and leave him standing outside, begging. In a rush of anger Corey threw a shoulder to the door. It creaked ominously. He drew back for a second assault. And then a key turned in the lock and the door was opened. White with anger, Ellen Worth confronted him. Corey moved her aside and entered, closing the door behind him.

MASTER HORSESHOER

LOOKING for a blacksmith shop where you can get your horse shod, cowboy? In a heap of Western towns today—even ranch country towns—you won't find it. Ranch cowboys always have done most of their own horseshoeing and still do, but town folks don't ride horses much any more except for pleasure, and there just aren't enough pleasure riders most places to keep a horseshoeing blacksmith in business.

Nevertheless, if you happen to ride into the city of Ft. Worth, Texas, on a tender horse, you might ask around for Ed Eitelman. This genial 72-year-old free-lance farrier is often called on by owners of $1,000 to $10,000 horses to give their hoofs his special expert attention.

As all horseback people know, shoeing horses is both hard work and a fine art, and plenty of them will swear that Eitelman has long been the most expert horseshoeing artist of them all. When he was only seventeen, Ed began learning the profession from his father, and he has been at it, at least as a part-time occupation, ever since. He has no idea how many thousands of horseshoes he has nailed on, but he does know that every one of them was carefully and conscientiously fitted to each individual hoof before a single nail was driven.

Nowadays, though still hale, hearty and happy when shoeing a horse, Ed shoes only horses brought to him with serious hoof trouble that special, expert shoe fitting can remedy, and he doesn't do it for the money he can make out of it, but simply because he loves horses. Contrasting horseshoeing with repairing automobiles, Ed Eitelman makes his point briefly: "Horses can feel. The blamed automobiles can't!"

——*S. Omar Barker*

Ellen retreated a step. "How dare you force your way into my home at this hour!" she blazed. "Do you think I'm the cheap Holly Arlidge kind? Ted Neale will kill you for this!"

Her mention of Holly startled Corey. "What's that about Holly Arlidge?" he demanded.

She shrugged contemptuously. "I saw you with her your second night in Escala," she said. "I'd gone for a walk, and I saw you on the hotel veranda—"

There was disgust in her voice. And she considered Holly cheap because she had seen him kissing her.

Suddenly Corey could stand no more of her scorn and superior airs. Scarcely realizing that he moved, he seized her shoulders. While she shrank in his grasp, staring up at him with fearful, fascinated eyes, he poured out the story which, ordinarily, could not have been wrung from his lips.

"Holly's breeding and background can match yours any day!" he said harshly. "What's more, we've known each other all our lives. We grew up on neighboring ranches. We were engaged to be married once. Only I never could get along with her brother, Mike. Their mother was pure Castilian Spanish and their father Irish. That combination of blood made them both hotheads. Mike didn't want Holly to marry me. A week before the wedding he got drunk and picked a quarrel—the worst we'd ever had. I couldn't hit him. I was too much bigger. But when he went too far I slapped his face—and he pulled a knife . . ."

Releasing Ellen, Corey turned away. Cold sweat ran down his face. "Mike was strong and quick. He drew blood and I lost my head. The next thing I knew he was dead. I'd killed him—with my bare hands."

HE LOST his voice as past horror washed over him anew. Again he saw Holly's white face as she stood over the body of the brother she had worshipped—the blaze of mad grief in her eyes as she snatched the gun out of Tullery's holster and tried to shoot him. Again he saw her borne forcibly away, struggly wildly, deaf to the old sheriff's reiterations that the testimony of a dozen witnesses had proved the killing accidental in the line of self-defense. . . .

Desperately Corey thrust the agonizing memory aside. Ellen had moved away, and she was gazing at him as though repulsed by his outburst. It remided Corey that all along she had seemed to consider him a lout and a killer.

Bitterness washed over him. Taking out the sack of gold, he yanked open its top. He tossed it on a table.

"Here's the gold stolen from me in the desert," he said. "I got it back from Ross Arlidge through Holly. If you want me to get back with any more of it safely, don't tell anyone at all where I've gone. Don't even breathe it to yourself!"

Corey walked a long time with no sense of direction. When the pounding of his blood abated and his mind cleared, he found that he had passed the *Dos Cedros* wagon yard and pressed on into the desert. A breeze rustled through mesquite. Stars overhead were thick, and there was still no moon. He would have a few dark nights on which to travel. That was good.

Corey turned and headed back. Thanks to his foresight, the wagon yard was dark and deserted. There were saddle horses and mules in the corral. He recalled having seen a few pack saddles around the stable, and he risked lantern light long enough to find and examine them. There were three, and they were in good shape. He could borrow a Winchester from the office shack. He found plenty of canteens on hand, since the company had provided them for their muleskinners. Food supplies he took from the cook shack.

In half an hour, leading three pack mules, he was heading into the southeast, straight towards the Sierra Negra Mountains. By sunrise he was a good distance into Mexico. He camped in an arroyo, giving his mount and mules a hatful of water each and a ration of grain. The animals would fare less well on the return trip, for then, in place of their own feed, they would be packing gold. But they

should be able to find enough bleached grass in scattered patches to sustain them.

He had wandered this section of desert, prospecting, long enough to know the location of every water hole, and the dry season was not yet at hand. The danger for him was an encounter with a bandit or rebel band. Salazar's forces would be the worst, of course. But others of his kind would not hesitate to kill for far less loot than was comprised by a one-horse, three-mule outfit.

Finding shade under the bank of a deep dry wash, Corey slept through the heat of the day. At sunset he built a tiny mesquite fire and cooked a meal. Gradually the red and gold of the sky turned to purple. By the time the purple had become a midnight blue, Corey was again under way.

WITH each new day the mountains that were his guiding mark grew in size and clarity until they loomed black and saw-toothed, in accordance with their name, against the sky. With increasing elevation saguaros grew stunted and thinned out. He climbed to the tops of low mesas. Eventually saguaros disappeared altogether and all forms of vegetation grew sparse. Through a wilderness of rock and sand and hardened lava spills he toiled, attended only by the thudding hoofs and laboring noises of his animals. Occasionally a coyote bayed or he heard the shrill whistle of a night bird. By day he saw distant dust clouds more than once. But none traveled in his direction, which was reassuring, as he drew near his objective.

Then the flickering light of a small fire caused him to by pass the last water hole upon which he had counted. The campers might be nothing more than a few harmless Indians. But they were more likely to be a rebel scouting party.

The next morning Corey built no fire. Breakfasting on two cold biscuits, he gave the last of his water to his animals. By that time he had angled into the high foothills valley up which he had fled northward

[*Turn page*]

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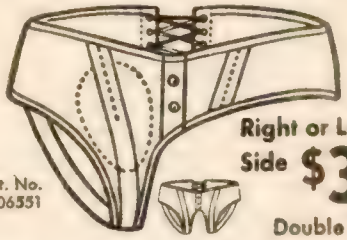

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from Salazar's attack months ago. Memory of the spring behind his shack caused him to press on. On this last lap he could abandon his practice of traveling only by dark. Besides, he would need daylight to locate his cache.

Moving on, eagerness built up within him. He rounded the last jutting shoulder of rock and reined to an abrupt halt.

Before him lay a scene of destruction and desolation. Nothing remained of his shack but ashes, and most of these had been blown away. In spiteful rage Salazar had destroyed everything in sight. As his animals drank at the spring, and he drank himself and filled canteens, Corey wondered how long Salazar had lingered, tramping up and down, driving his men in a vain search for hidden gold, while he raged in disappointment and chagrin. For he had undoubtedly expected to find a mine. Knowing little of the physical properties of gold, there was little likelihood that he would have recognized the nuggets turned over to him by a fawning storekeeper as placer gold.

The spring behind Corey's shack gushed out from a cave in a rock wall and flowed strongly for a hundred yards before it disappeared. However, in the dim, forgotten past, that cave had been the outlet of a underground river. And along the course of the river's dry, ancient bed, winding down the valley, Corey had discovered pockets of yellow wealth washed down ages ago from some rich, undiscovered lode in the Sierra Negras above.

It had been his practice to make a trip for supplies only when absolutely necessary. Each time he had gone to a different town or village, never lingering long enough to permit interest in himself and the gold with which he made his purchases to reach unwelcome proportions. Then one day ill chance took him into a village being honored by the visit of a rebel patron.

Seeking to curry favor, the storekeeper had sent word to its leader, Salazar, that a gringo prospector had just paid for supplies with gold and then headed towards the Sierra Negras. Corey had managed to lose pursuit that time. It had taken Salazar months to learn his name and locate his camp. And then he had found his victory an empty one.

PRESSING on up the valley, Corey presently picked out a low, squat rock somewhat in the shape of a toadstool. Dismounting, he placed his back to it and faced the east. He counted off five steps. Then he knelt and began to tug at a flat slab of rock no different from a hundred others scattered about. Digging with his fingers, he lifted it on end and let it fall backwards. A recess below was crammed with bulging buckskin sacks. Corey lifted one, thrilling to its weight.

Here was power. A kind to which he had long been indifferent, but which he coveted now. The kind of power Bruss had wielded for so long and which might at last be turned about to destroy him.

Less than half the cache loaded the mules. The remainder would have to be left for another time, if ever. That could not be helped. Corey used a mesquite branch to erase all hoof and boot tracks in the vicinity. Wiping sweat from his forehead, he sat down on a rock. Not until then did he admit a secret fear that he would never make it this far. It did not stand to reason that he should encounter no trouble at all. However, it seemed that now the biggest hurdle had been made.

"Reckon I should camp at the spring until dark," he muttered. "But something tells me to keep moving."

Tethering one mule behind the other and leading the first, he set his face in the direction of Escala. Heavily burdened, the mules must necessarily travel at a slower pace than he had held coming. Now would be the worst time to encounteer trouble. Keenly aware of that fact, Corey climbed out of the narrow, rockbound valley cautiously and halted on the last height to sweep the desert below with a searching gaze.

It was due to this vigilance that he spied three advancing horsemen at the same moment that they spied him. They were coming out of the northwest, as though trailing him. It jolted Corey to realize they

probably were. That campfire last night at Coyote Wells! From there they must have run across enough sign of his passing to turn them, in curiosity and suspicion, this way. Certainly they were hostile, for after pulling up with a few gestures, the westering sun glinted on metal. In near unison three reports rang out. Carbines.

Bullets spanged off rock on either side of Corey. Leaping to the ground, he took time to tether his horse and the lead mule securely to a stunted clump of mesquite. Swiftly, then, he drew his borrowed rifle from a saddle scabbard and, crouching, ran for a vantage point.

Charging at a wild gallop, the three horsemen were almost at the foot of the height he commanded. It put them close enough for Corey to make out dark, fierce faces shaded by huge sombreros. Each carried a holstered sixgun and a knife tucked into wide, bright-colored sashes.

Here were neither ignorant, misled *peones* nor fiery patriots, seeking liberty or death. Here were typical Border cutthroats.

Corey threw his rifle to his shoulder. The report of the Winchester cracked through the high, thin air. A horse screamed shrilly and went down. Thrown over its head, its Mexican rider slid along the ground, spuming up dust, and came to rest in a huddled heap.

Shrill yells of rage broke from his companions. Supplanting carbines with pistols and firing wildly, they lashed their mounts to greater speed. Courage and endurance in the desert were usually the only attributes of their kind, with good judgment rare, often completely lacking. Corey fired three more shots, placing them close in the hope of turning them back.

But they started up the steep slope towards him, driving their horses in great, scrambling leaps. Lead whistled past him. The whine of ricochet filled the air. His horse and mules, although out of the line of fire, began to snort and tramp about nervously. Corey sent a high-peaked sombrero twirling. Still they pressed on.

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COREY realized that he could permit his reluctance to take human life to hold him back no longer. Grimly he drew bead again and squeezed trigger. The foremost horseman straightened in his saddle, swayed widely and plunged to the ground. Sheering away, his horse bolted. The third Mexican, finding himself suddenly alone, yanked up on reins so hard and quick that he almost pulled his mount over backward on the steep slope. Small in build, and wiry, he leaped to the ground and dived for cover. Corey shot him before he reached it.

Slowly the vibrations of gunfire in the air died away and left only an echo in Corey's ears. He wiped sweat out of his eyes and found blood mingled with it. He had been nicked on the forehead by a flying splinter of rock. Corey wiped his face on a shirt sleeve and forgot the tiny cut. Making his way down the steep slope, he stooped and turned over the nearest Mexican.

The man had ben hit in the right shoulder and was unconscious. The first Mexican he had shot was dead. But the remaining one, stunned by his fall, was beginning to stir. Corey stood over him with leveled sixgun as he roused to full consciousness. Fear flashed into black eyes and vanished. Cut throat he might be, but he had nerve.

"Who are you?" demanded Corey in Spanish.

"Ezequiel Juarado—soldier of free *Mejico.*"

"Your leader?"

"The great and glorious General Salazar. He—"

Corey cut off the eulogy. "I can guess the rest," he said. "Salazar figured I'd come back for my gold sooner or later. So he left you three boys hanging around here to grab me when I showed up. Where is Salazar's main force now?"

The Mexican shrugged. "Somewhere in the west and south."

"Have you seen anyone else around here lately?"

The raider shook his head. Thereafter the answer to each question was the same. *"Quién sabe?"* Corey gave up at last. He collected all the guns and smashed the carbines. The pistols he strung upon the dead Mexican's sash and hung them from his saddlehorn.

Presently he said, "I'll leave you your horse and fod supplies. That way you can move your wounded friend over to the spring and get by all right until he's able to travel."

The Mexican expresed no gratitude for the sparing of his life. It passed through Corey's mind that it could turn out to be a great mistake on his part. But under the circumstances there was nothing else he could do.

HE PLODDED through blistering heat with scarcely a halt. Through the hour of sunset he traveled, through gathering purple shadows and on into the night. He drove himself until he felt numb with exhaustion, and his eyelids, heavy with the need of sleep, closed over burning eyes. The fear of wandering off his course forced him at last to a stop. Every step must head in the right direction. He could not afford the slightest divergence either way.

The last of the grain was tied behind his saddle. He divided it up into a meagre ration for each animal. Unsaddling, he relieved the mules of their burdens and picketed them and his horse to mesquite bushes, where they could browse on scattered tufts of dried grass. Wrapped in a blanket, he lay down and was asleep almost before his long frame settled upon the ground.

The sun, burning his face, awakened him. Shaded by a flutted-columned saguaro, he had escaped its fierce rays until almost noon. He realized how long he had lain in a near coma of exhaustion, helpless prey to any marauder who might have come along. But all was well.

It was too hot to eat. He waited until sunset to build a fire and cook a meal. Afterwards he rested and kept watch until darkness fell.

He would head straight for the Border now, cross it, and then turn westward towards Escala. Being a mile or two on U.S. soil would not guarantee safety, of

course, but the Mexicans he had just defeated had undoubtedly been patrolling this area for some time. and he was inclined to believe the claim that it had been untraveled recently. It was logical that Salazar should hole up somewhere to the west and south where he could keep in close contact with Bruss. A course above the Border might be the one on which the least trouble was likely to be encountered.

Corey never knew whether it was due to luck or sound judgment, but from there on everything continued to go well. He scouted ahead from each high place. On the second night a new moon made its appearance. It shed enough pale light to increase visibility to double its former distance. Once, from a ridge top, with his animals concealed behind its bulk, Corey watched a party of Mexicans pass, driving a band of obviously stolen horses southward. So he traveled with extreme caution. And one night at last he emerged from an arroyo to see Escala ahead.

He wanted to stand in his stirrups and cheer. He was weary and ragged and half-starved. His mount and his mules were gaunt and sore-footed. But he had lost none of them. He had completed the dangerous trek from which he had known it was very likely he would never return. He was a beggar no longer, and now he'd take care of Big West and Charles Bruss.

The hour was late, somewhere between midnight and two o'clock. While the main part of town roared with life, its back streets were dark and deserted. Only the baying of a coyote attended Corey's advance upon the *Dos Cedros* wagon yard. He found the gate unlocked, unguarded. He headed straight for the stable. Bury the gold . . . care for the mules and horse . . . then a wash and shave for himself before he turned in.

AN HOUR LATER he let himself into the bunkhouse, found the lamp in its accustomed place and lit it. There was a rustling sound in one corner. He turned quickly. Ellen Worth stood be-

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side one of the bunks. She looked dishevelled, as though she had been lying down.

"You're back!" she whispered. "I've been hoping—praying for your safe return. Thank God you made it!"

She sounded sincere. But Corey remembered the note upon which they had parted. "You can stop worrying," he said bitterly. "I've brought back all the gold three mules could carry. I've just finished hiding it."

She stood a moment as though transfixed. Then she glided towards him. She was wearing a thin summer dress, low-cut, with a silken shawl thrown about her shoulders. Her eyes looked darker than gray, and luminous.

"It wasn't the gold I worried about, Dave," she said softly. "It was you!"

Dave. The name sounded strange from her lips. But no stranger than her remark and look. Gazing at her, Corey felt a stirring of distrust.

"What are you doing here at this hour?" he demanded.

"Waiting for you. I couldn't stand waiting at home any longer. I wanted to know the minute you returned. Oh, Dave!"

Suddenly she threw her arms about him and pressed close, hiding her face against him. He stood stock-still, unable to move. It didn't make sense. Ellen Worth, the proud and arrogant . . . who had considered him little better than dirt under her feet . . .

She began to speak in a muffled voice. "Can't you guess what I'm trying to say, Dave? Won't you help just a little? I'm in love with you."

He seized her with swift, ruthless hands. "What kind of deviltry are you up to?"

She did not wince beneath the bite of his fingers into her flesh. She looked up at him, pale, with parted lips and darkened eyes.

"I deserve that," she said. "I treated you badly. But I had to, Dave. I was engaged to Ted and you were a stranger—mysterious and a little frightening. You can't blame me for not wanting to fall in love with you. But I can't fight it any more."

The break of her voice was a caress. She was humble and sweet as he had never dreamed she could be. Yet through her humility ran a thread of eagerness. Confusion swept over Corey. Something warned him to back off. Yet, inevitably, his blood surged to her physical appeal. As he tried to fight it, his grip on her shoulders relaxed. She broke free. Standing on tiptoe, she slid her arms around his neck and pressed her lips to his.

Before reaction could set in, the door behind them burst open. Ellen's arms dropped and she shrank away.

"Ted!" she whispered.

Standing in the doorway, Ted Neale's gaze flamed in her direction.

"You've come here three nights!" he flung out. "I followed you each time. I hoped Corey wouldn't come back. If he did, I hoped you'd find you needed and wanted my protection. I never dreamed you'd lose your head over him so bad that—" He choked and cords stood out in his neck. As he lunged forward, Ellen threw herself into his path.

"No, Ted!" She clutched at him wildly. "If you fight there'll be talk! I couldn't stand that! Please—for my sake!"

NEALE looked down at her with anguished eyes. "It's for your sake I've got to shut him up!" he said hoarsely. "Do you think I can let him brag all over town that if I'd broken in here five minutes later—"

"Neale!" cried Corey in sharp protest.

But Ellen continued to cling to the other man, desperately keeping her slim body between them. "Dave wouldn't do that!" she sobbed. "He loves me! We're going to be married!"

Neale became a frozen statue with burning eyes. "Is that true, Corey?"

Ellen's eyes, bright with tears, begged for an affirmative answer. Never had she looked lovelier or more appealing than in this moment of distress. Why not, thought Corey. He would not be the first man to settle for less than his heart's desire. And it was something to be wanted and needed.

"Yes," he said. "It's true . . ."

"See?" Ellen released her grasp on Neale and stepped back.

But her joy and relief at Corey's statement made painfully clear the fact that the thought of marriage had not entered Corey's mind until this moment. Neale's frozen rigidity vanished. A tide of dark blood surged into his face.

"So you'll do the right thing," he grated, "if you have to!"

Corey had no chance to duck. Neale's right arm lashed out. It seemed to Corey that the bunkhouse floor slipped out from under his feet and the entire building crashed into his face. Dimly he heard Ellen scream. Something hard and solid thumped against his back. He did not realize it was the floor until flashing lights ceased to spin before his eyes and Neale's face came into focus.

Crouching, the latter's jaw was thrust out and his eyes glittered. "Get up!" he rasped, and he began to curse Corey out of a vocabulary worthy of a muleskinner.

Ellen shrank away. This was a Ted Neale she had never seen before, had never dreamed existed. Every vestige of education had been stripped away. Corey knew that if it went any farther, the last shackle of civilization would vanish also. Shaking his head, he tried to fight down a responsive leap of primitive fury within himself—the tide of black violence he feared more than anything else because of the death it had brought to Holly's brother long ago and could bring now to another man whose life he had no wish to take.

Rolling over, he whipped out his gun and scrambled to his feet. "Keep away!" he warned. "I don't want to kill you!"

But Neale was past reason. Straight into the leveled gun he lunged. And Corey, because he could not squeeze the trigger, took another blow that sent him crashing into the washstand. He went down with a clatter of empty water bucket and tin basin. This time the flashing lights before his eyes were red and they spread searingly to his brain.

[*Turn page*]

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He dropped the gun and forgot it. Blindly he dived, caught Neale about the hips and upset him. Locked together, they began to roll, tearing and hitting at each other savagely. Objects of furniture in their path were swept aside or overturned, falling upon both impartially. Pain stabbed Corey. He tasted his own blood. And then it was too late to draw back or to remember anything.

The narrowness of the doorway halted their rolling progress. His back wedged against the jamb, Corey felt Neale's hands groping for his throat. Simultaneously Neale strove to throw himself astride Corey's body. Corey doubled up just in time, planted a foot in Neale's middle and straightened his leg. Neale grunted as he was catapulted backward. Although he landed with a thump that shook the building, he scrambled up at once. By that time Corey was also on his feet.

Neale was fast and obviously versed in the art of boxing. He knocked Corey through the open doorway and leaped after him.

THEY FOUGHT on the ground in darkness and confusion, numbed to pain, deaf to the rasping sound of air pumping in and out of laboring lungs, oblivious of waning strength. Afterward Corey recalled impressions that had registered subconsciously. Impressions of screams and finally gunshots. And a glimpse of Ellen, a slim, rigid shape in dim moonlight, with a hand lifted skyward and spitting fire.

It didn't make sense then. Nor was he aware that the pace of the battle had slowed. He did not realize that both he and Neale were reeling with exhaustion, that the blows they swung at each other were becoming ludicrously awkward and slow. Again and again they fought their way to their feet, only to go down to the ground once more, together. Presently, when Corey dragged himself erect, Neale failed for the first time to rise also. Hazily he stared down at the latter's prone shape.

Then, through the madness gripping his brain, came a flash of reason. A stab of fear followed. Dropping to his knees, he fumbled for a heart beat. And in that moment Neale moaned and began to sit up. He was battered and beaten, but alive.

Suddenly Corey became aware that Ellen was no longer the only onlooker. A man held a lantern high. In its murky light he saw the faces of other men frozen in various mixtures of emotions.

A flood of relief and gratitude washed through Corey. His bitter years of remorse and self-discipline had not been in vain. No longer need he dread the black tide of passion that had once cost him everything worth-while in life. He was free at last. He had won the greatest victory of all—over himself.

He tried to regain his feet and fell flat. Then the strange silence gripping the onlookers broke into a buzz of exclamations and comments. Above it rang out sudden commands.

"Help him into the bunkhouse!"

"Give me a hand with Neale!"

"Reckon we'd better pack him over to the doc's place. He sure looks a mess . . ."

The bedlam of voices faded. The next thing Corey knew he was lying in a bunk, stripped to the waist, and Holly was bending over him. At her side a *Dos Cedros* hand named Dawes held a lighted lamp. Other figures, silent and watchful, stood in the background. A stool close by held a basin of water and a white, lace-trimmed petticoat. Holly was sponging his face with a piece of the garment. Although her touch was gentle, it hurt.

When she saw his eyes open, she said, "Lie still. I'll be through in a minute."

It was easier to obey than to ask questions. Weariness lay upon him like a weight. The burning sting of a medication daubed here and there aroused and lifted him from his pillow. Holly pressed him back. As the stinging faded, a sensation of soothing coolness took its place.

"How did you get here?" His voice was little more than a whisper. He'd rest a moment . . .

His next sensation was that of a flood of heat beating upon him. He opened his eyes to a glare of sun and fancied himself

still in the desert until he started to sit up and heard the creaking of a bunk beneath him. As he fell back with an involuntary groan, Holly bent over him once more. Her hand felt soft and cool on his forehead.

"Still no fever," she announced. "That's fine. I was a little worried last night."

"You sat up with me?"

"You had to be watched over," she answered. "Lately I've been doing my sleeping daytimes anyway, to give Henry time off from nightshift at the desk. Hungry?"

Without awaiting his reply she went to the door and spoke to someone outside. "Josh Dawes has been standing by, too," she said. "He'll fetch you a tray from the hotel kitchen."

She hung a blanket over the window through which sunlight streamed into his face. Then she fetched a stool and seated herself beside him. And Corey remembered the question that had gone unanswered the preceding night.

"How did you get here?"

She lifted heavy lashes. "Ellen thought you and Neale were killing each other. When screaming for help didn't do any good, she fired your gun into the air to draw a crowd. I was part of it."

Then she knew, or guessed, that what he and Neale had fought over was Ellen Worth herself.

(To be continued in the next issue)

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 88)

1. The southwest.
2. Mockingbird.
3. Nez Percé, Gros Ventres, Blackfeet, Mescalero Apache, Hunkpapa.
4. Peeling a cow means skinning it, peeling a bronc means riding it when it bucks.
5. False. The biggest mountain lion I ever killed weighed 210 pounds and a 300-pound lion would be an astonishing whopper.
6. Utah.
7. Lake Tahoe, between California and Nevada.
8. A heavy, fairly shallow iron pot or skillet, usually with three short stubby legs, always with an equally heavy iron lid, dished so that hot coals can be piled on top of it for baking biscuits.
9. New Mexico.
10. Gully or gulch. Pronounced ah-RROH-yoh.

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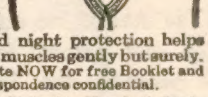

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WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

MAN OF ARIES
MAR. 21 — APR. 20

WITH Aries, the sign of pioneer courage and natural leadership dominant in the heavens, the Territory of Alaska, popularly known as "America's Last Frontier," was purchased from Russia in 1867. Men born under the influence of this sign are likely to abound in energy and a love of adventure, and shine wherever strength and initiative are needed.

The Aries man will have some of the attributes of the Ram which is the symbol of his Zodiacal sign. His methods are direct and forceful—they may not be tactful, but they are effective, for once having determined that an object is worth attaining, the Aries man is not likely to give up until he has rammed his way right to the top.

But he should be cautioned against carrying his virtues to an extreme: his courage may become bravado, his idealism fanaticism, his strength stubbornness. Often he will not know his own strength or the power of his personality, and so he may seem over-aggressive or too opinionated in the eyes of the woman whom he seeks to impress.

There is another side to the Aries man. In matters of the heart he is basically chivalrous and anxious to serve. A veritable Sir Galahad, his motives are usually beyond reproach, and there is nothing more pleasing to the Aries man than to be called upon in an emergency. In a crisis, the Aries man can be expected to keep calm.

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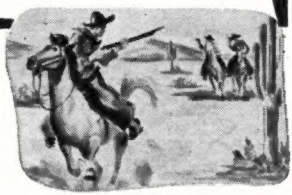

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